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PATHS OF THE DEAD

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IN THE WOOD

'Paths of the Dead'

Frontispiece

Paths of the Dead

A Romance of the Present Day

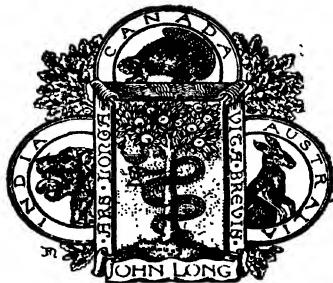
By

Hume Nisbet

Author of

'Bail Up,' 'The Revenge of Valerie,' 'Comrades of the Black Cross,'
'Children of Hermes,' 'The Bushranger's Sweetheart,'
Etc., etc., etc.

With Frontispiece by M NISBET



London

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1899

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To
THOMAS HARDY
NOVELIST
WITH DEEP ADMIRATION
BY THE
AUTHOR

P R E F A C E

GENTLE READER,—I have set to work to follow out the career of a very ordinary kind of female. One of the ten thousand who may be seen on all days and nights, flaunting their audacity in the eyes of the world. Whether I have drawn and coloured my picture well or ill must be left to your verdict. She belongs to the tribe of whom the experienced Solomon has truly written, ‘Whose ways are crooked and froward is their paths. Her house inclineth unto death, and her paths unto the dead.’ She is as ancient as sin, and as common as maggots in summer.

Some of her kind attain to high places and lofty positions at times (when these heights are occupied by fools), with their dogged perseverance and stale devices. But they are even the same glittering, carrion flies; venomous blood-suckers and treacherous, callous hypocrites as they were in the days of the sage Solomon. They are as ready to descant upon art, poetry, sentiment, theosophy, or any other cult which may be the vogue, while looking out for the main chance, as they were to descant about Isis and Hathor under the Pharaohs. They are nearly all as wooden-headed and stupid as they are heartless, ignorant and spiteful. Indeed, so beast-like are their actions, that they would incline one

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to the Mohammedan belief that women are soulless, only that the men who consort with them are more numerous and even more bestial and obtuse than they are.

My Mrs Hyacinthine Hart-Beachcomber is only a type of feminine egotism, as her opposite Beatrice Gray is the type of woman with mind and soul, a production growing every year more numerous in this rejuvenating world. The woman who can think for herself, and who no longer consents to be fettered by slavish traditions.

Arnold Kirklock is, like Hyacinthine, a very ordinary young man of birth, position and fashion of the present day. A Laodicean, who is neither hot nor cold. That he does some mischief with his aimless, indefinite life is natural from one of his lukewarm disposition. He suffers accordingly, where a worse but stronger man might have so far escaped.

Thus, my characters, being all strictly typical, are as real as if they had been drawn from individuals. It is always safe business for a novelist to work upon ordinary and every-day types, which suit any age. He is sure to find readers who recognise the characters in any place or period where the book may chance to fall. Yet, by this same recognition, which would have happened with a Carthaginian reader, I must rigidly insist on being exonerated from the odium of making models of any particular living personages. To charge authors with this crime is a habit too often indulged in by critics of the present day, to the sad crippling of the inventor's hand.

I don't suppose anyone ever yet recognised himself as a sneak, a hypocrite, an egotist or a criminal. Yet, believe me, gentle Reader, there is not so much difference be-

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tween the most virtuous and pharisaical of us and the discovered ruffian whom we with pious horror condemn.

To be confidential, as authors always should be with their readers, I must confess that I have been a mean liar and envious traducer scores of times ; also a skulking thief and general breaker of the ten commandments, *in thought*, if not in deed, more times than I can remember. It may be that I have not actually killed my enemy (except with my pen), but I might have done so only for a latent cowardice and never-to-be-forgotten dread of having my neck stretched, much as it required drawing out. I have known lots of people who would have caused me but small remorse to have given a lift from this terrestrial globe if I could have done so with impunity—much less remorse, I think, than would the drowning of a litter of kittens.

But there's the rub, must give us pause
For who would bear the whips and scorns of Time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes
When he might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin ?'

Not on himself, but to his oppressor.

One thing I do certainly know of a surety, and that is, I would far sooner kill fourteen good men and true than shorten my own miserable and worthless existence by a year.

At the same time, I'd rather they lived, if only to save myself from the very uncomfortable reflections which their removing might afterwards cause me in my solitary hours. I fancy if my reader will also look fairly into his own mind he will agree with me that these might be his own closet confessions. The actual murderer is a man whom

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passion has made to forget fear and discretion. He has done what we have all wished to do in our moments of rage. Ergo, he is no worse than we are, only more reckless.

With these confidences and reflections I leave my story to your consideration. I may tell you candidly I never wrote a more interesting romance. It has kept me up perfectly engrossed many a night when I ought to have been in bed. I trust it may be able to keep you likewise, at least, one or two nights an hour or so later in your chair than you are used to sit.—With this hope, believe me to be, Your obedient Servant,

THE AUTHOR

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PATHS OF THE DEAD

CHAPTER I

ONE OF THE PATHS

‘ DANGEROUS ! ’

Arnold Kirklock glanced from the warning signboard to the road in front of him. About sixty yards of pretty stiff hill sloped downwards, with a fine level stretch beyond, as far as he could see.

Arnold Kirklock was a gentleman of independent fortune and respectable pedigree. He was twenty-three years of age, tall, slender and well-built, with muscles in splendid condition through constant exercise, and appetites as yet under strict control. Nature had united with Fortune to bestow upon him her best gifts, and make as perfect an animal as the midsummer sun ever shone upon.

With youth, health and high spirits, endowed with regular features, good, hardy colour, fine, bold, flashing dark eyes, a splendid self-appreciation of these gifts, and a conscience as unassertive as the liver is still, and it does not matter much whether the day is wet or dry, or the wind blows east or west, the happy mortal is able to take all the changes with equanimity. Arnold Kirklock was the sort of young gentleman who gets pretty well everything he desires without much exertion. As he belonged to the latter end of the nineteenth century this was as well, for he was not likely to exert himself much for anything or anyone.

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In town he liked to saunter about lazily, spending a good deal of time at his clubs, over his toilet, and with his tailor. He was not at all literary inclined, nor artistic; indeed, his virtues, like his vices and intellectual qualities, were decidedly of the negative order.

But he was unmistakably good looking and gentlemanly, and on the whole a pleasant young fellow. When a man has as much money as he requires, and has never suffered from indigestion, nerves, nor headache, it is not difficult for him to be pleasant and affable.

Arnold Kirklock was dark but richly coloured in complexion. He possessed fine white teeth, and bold black eyes. A small, jetty moustache covered his upper lip, and his lower lip was full and moistly red. He had fine, crisp, curly hair, that broke from under the peak of his cycling cap in tangled short masses, and his brown hands, now grasping the handles of his bicycle, were strong and sinewy.

‘Dangerous!’

He did not read all the directions on the signboard, for he had passed so many such kindly warnings since he left London, and he could see for himself that it was not a descent to despise.

Not exactly dangerous, however, with that level curve at the bottom, inclining, if anything, gently upwards. He therefore started the decline slowly, keeping his feet firmly on the pedals until he was half-way down.

Then, in order to enjoy the level stretch without exertion, he suddenly removed his feet from the pedals to the rests, and let the machine go.

There is a delicious sensation of flying through the air without an effort, when the rider puts his feet on the rests and his bicycle shoots down a hill. Something like what a swallow must enjoy when he folds his wings and skims silently and swiftly.

And when the rider knows his ground thoroughly, there is nothing foolhardy or reckless about this yielding up of control. Although he cannot stop he is still able to guide his master right or left. But, with the front a mystery, the rider who takes his feet from the pedals exhibits a lack of prudence and a temerity which passes courage.

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Arnold Kirklock had never been in this part of the country before, and although, as far as he could see, the road was safe, yet he could not see very far.

The lofty, flower-covered hedges of Devon lined both sides of the way. In front of him stretched a dense fir wood, into which the roadway curved and was hidden. Above him the sky arched brightly blue and clustered with summer clouds.

He had glanced at the road and the edge of the wood as he had glanced at the warning signboard, and as he generally looked at life—carelessly and without consideration. This was the keynote to his character. He took things for granted, and seldom wasted mental effort in analysing.

Had he been gifted with a little more discretion he would have gone closer to the board and read what lay under the large word, 'Dangerous!' Also, while at the summit of the hill, if, instead of looking only at the road, he had glanced to the top of the trees and reasoned a moment, he would not have yielded to the reckless impulse of raising his feet, and perhaps this story need not have been chronicled. Reason might have taught him that from the height he then occupied, if the country had been level beyond that wood, he must have seen more than the outer edges of it. Half-way down the hill, however, anyone might have taken the road as he had done from the top, yet even then only fools would have risked the unknown so blindly.

A horse with the bit in its mouth is bad enough, but not one-hundredth part so deadly as a bicycle running away with its rider. Yet the sensation is exquisitely thrilling. As the machine bolted, Arnold gave himself up to the full enjoyment of the moment. Down like a sledge on a smooth slide it flew, while outside objects became a hazy blurr of soft colour. The rider had nothing to do except watch that turn of the road towards which he was shooting with the velocity of a rifle bullet.

It did not take many seconds to reach the foot of the hill, yet in the fierce delight of that lightning pace a month of stagnant joys were compressed. The soft wind became like a hurricane as it beat upon that flushed face and glowing chest. His young blood woke into sudden and tumultu-

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ous life. He was rushing on the wings of chance ; rushing upon the unknown with a reckless confidence and wild exultation. Yet he sat motionless, watching for that corner.

When he reached the foot of the hill he noted, but without apprehension, that what he had taken for level ground from the top, was still a gentle slope downwards. He expected it would gradually come to a level by-and-by, therefore he sat passively, but watchfully.

Of course, he could do nothing else now that he had relinquished his control, except keep on. The machine was rushing along too rapidly for him to put his feet down. To run it into the hedge would have meant a bad tumble, and besides, he saw no necessity for stopping.

Swiftly he rounded the corner, and in another minute was surrounded by trees. Before him, at about forty yards, lay another corner to round, the road also was gradually taking a more decided dip, and for the first time Arnold Kirklock felt a trifle uneasy.

As he approached the second corner, he sounded his bell, then he darted round.

‘My God!’ he cried, while his dusky face became like clay at what he saw before him. Then he lost his head and forgot all about his brake. A long, straight road, stretching for at least a mile without a stop, and sloping down like the roof of a house. His bicycle was flying at an incredible speed. Nothing could stop or save him now. His hour had come. In front of him spread the sea, blue, with purple and bright green stripes. He saw everything clearly and distinctly ; the snowy clouds with the soft, ruddy headlands ; the sunlit houses of a small fishing village that stood between him and the sea. Ah, these houses with their hard stone walls, that was where the end would come.

After that first exclamation, with the icy thrill of horror which accompanied it, all sensation seemed arrested. He felt no more. Yet his perception became preternaturally quickened, and every object which flashed past him he noticed, even while his glaring eyes were fixed on those houses.

He saw over the wall a churchyard, with the white stones

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and the church in its centre. He observed that it was stone walls, and no longer hedges, he was passing. He saw a woman on the side path throw up her hands, and felt her scream as he bore down upon her.

He knew that she was screaming for him to stop, and he yelled back,—

‘Can’t.’

He was calm enough to answer this woman, the few instants before annihilation. Indeed, although seconds only had passed since he began that fatal descent, it seemed as if he had been sitting grasping the handles for ages, and as if he was doomed to fly for ever down that everlasting hill.

Although he was rushing so madly through space that the wind banished all other sounds, and rang in his brains like a tempest, he seemed as if he was not moving. He sat steady as on a rock, with the blast beating in his face, and blowing his hair back from his brow. His cap had gone, and his coat had burst open, while the soft collar of his flannel shirt lay up against his chin. But he felt neither hot nor cold; indeed, all physical feeling was numbed during those few seconds during which he saw and *thought*.

All his past had flashed before him in the first minute which succeeded the thrill of horror. In those seconds he lived again *slowly*, scenes which he had remembered before, and scenes which he had forgotten until then.

But as if these had not been sufficient to fill the vast vault of that minute, he saw, as if he had been present, events which had occurred before he was born, events which he had heard about. They all leaped into that instantaneous mind-flash with vivid distinctness. The next instant all those visions had been replaced by a crowd of other images, events and objects which he was positive he had not yet experienced or known. They came in legions of pictures, all vivid in colouring and form. They swept one crowd after another as if he was driving through them at a snail’s pace. What a time those visions of the unknown lasted! How many thousands of ages were crammed into the vastness of that second minute of time!

Then it all cleared, and he was in a void, within which

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he sat alone. His mind was blank, but he could still see what he was approaching. He watched the nearing houses without emotion. He knew that his bicycle was flying swifter than the fastest express, and winging him to destruction, but as those past minutes had been prolonged to centuries, so was the present and last one. He was watching, as if outside himself, the coming of a catastrophe which seemed as if it would never come, and in which he was only apathetically interested.

He saw the end of the road ; that is the end, as far as he was concerned. He knew now, by that preternatural new sense which had come upon him, that it turned abruptly round by the first cottage. It was a pretty cottage, with a covered porch, and a mass of greenery on its walls. Between that green-covered side and the road ran a low wall. That was where his machine would strike, and dash his body to pieces. He looked at the exact place where he was about to butt against, calmly, while he waited patiently.

All at once the wall and cottage seemed to dissolve like a soft mist, through which he had drifted without the slightest shock.

CHAPTER II

IN THE COTTAGE

It was the month of May, ten months after Arnold Kirklock's terrible accident. He was still alive, and at Ivydene Cottage, the walls of which had arrested his farther progress.

It had been a most fearful crash, although it seemed such a soft settling into rest to him at the time. To those who saw him as he rushed at the wall, and rebounded to the other side of the road, it seemed impossible that he could ever survive such a shock. His bicycle was smashed to pieces, and his body one mass of broken bones.

They had picked up that bruised and bloody mass of quivering humanity, and carried it into Ivydene Cottage, expecting nothing else except a burial. Accidents had happened before at the foot of that hill—horses breaking away—but up to this time neither horse nor rider had escaped with life. It was called Breakneck Hill, and it justified its title.

The natives of Deepwold, as the fishing and smuggling village was called, had many legends and stories to tell about Breakneck Hill, and as they had gathered in front of the cottage, waiting for the report of the doctor, they recalled the last accident that took place five years previously.

'I was standing just by this corner,' said one young woman, with a child in her arms, 'waiting on my John, and wondering what kept him so late. It was pitchy dark, when all at once I heard a sound like thunder coming down the hill, which frightened me so much that I ran

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across the road and hid round the corner. It was lucky I did this, or I'd have been killed also, for next moment a horse and gig, with two gentlemen inside, struck just where I had been standing. I shall never forget the noise of that smashing. They were all dead the moment they struck, and the gig was broken into firewood. As for the horse and men, they were all like pulp. I never saw such a sight as I looked on then, when some of the neighbours ran up with lamps. It made me sick to see it.'

'It will be the same with this young fellow. He will never speak more. He cannot have a whole bone left. Look at the mark he has left on the wall.'

They looked at the broken mortar and the dislodged stone, and then at the wrecked bicycle which lay amongst the grass on the other side of the road. The bent wires and rods were half-embedded in a mass of bushes and weeds.

'I saw him spring from that wall like a cricket ball and bound five feet in the air as he went over the road and stuck in this tangle, and then he never moved,' said one of the witnesses. 'Nothing mortal could get over that kick back.'

'But his face wasn't touched, nor his head, It was all in his body where he was bruised,' said another, who had helped to carry the stranger indoors.

'Ay, that was limp enough. Just like a bag of sausage meat. But his face was all right, and it was a good-looking face, too.'

At this moment the doctor came out, and the people asked him if the young man was dead. They all expected the answer, and were astonished when the doctor said,—

'Not yet, friends.'

The doctor was as much surprised as the whole village was when day after day he came and still found the spirit clinging to that bruised and broken body. For weeks Arnold Kirklock was unconscious of all pain. For months he was unable to move hand or foot, but lay on the bed to which they had brought him, an inert mass of broken bones.

But he had charitable people to wait on and nurse him,

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and the best surgical and medical assistance. These, aided by his own superb constitution and the healthy Devon air, gradually brought him back to a world of aches and pains.

Mrs Gray, the widow of a sea captain, owned the cottage and lived here with her granddaughter Beatrice, the orphan and only child of her dead son. These were both well respected in the village, having sufficient income to live upon comfortably. They gave the young stranger shelter without having any hope that he would linger past the day. But when they found that life still lingered, Mrs Gray, at the advice of the doctor, examined his pocket-book, and by this means discovered his friends. These were communicated with, and an uncle, aunt and sister came to visit him.

After this the most expensive London physician came and examined the unconscious invalid, held a consultation with the village doctor, and left the case in his hands and that of Mother Nature. Then Arnold was pulled through, and, as he could not be removed, was left under the charge of the young and old ladies.

Mrs Gray was a woman verging on sixty, who had come to Deepwold for her health. She had lost everyone she had cared for except her grandchild, and although a martyr to physical trouble yet was cheerful and contented to wait for the coming of death. Not being able to help much in the sickroom, she left that duty to be done by Beatrice and the housekeeper.

Beatrice Gray at this time was sixteen years old. Tall and womanly for her age, and, although country trained, yet well educated and ladylike in her manners. She had not quite the superficial polish of the fashionable sister of Arnold, having never been farther than Exeter, where she had been to school, but she was quite able to hold her own, even with Miss Blanche Kirklock or anyone else. Her face was an expressive one rather than strictly beautiful—that is, she looked neither like a Greek statue nor a hair-dresser's doll. Her nose was slightly prominent, and her mouth somewhat larger than dolls' mouths should be. Her chin also was of rather a firm and decided shape.

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Her chief beauty lay in her eyes and expression, and these were charming beyond description. Charming now in her unsophisticated youth and innocence, with the promise of nobler developments by-and-by. The colour of the eyes would be called grey when in their normal state, grey inclined to dark blue, but they changed with her moods, growing darker and more violet-tinted when she was moved to pathos, or lighter and warmer as well as brighter when the spirit of fun lit them. At night, that is by lamplight, they were often called black.

Well set apart from the bridge of the nose, under that wide, smooth forehead, they gave her a singularly candid and winning appearance. They were eyes to look into and trust. When she laughed, which she did easily at this period of her life, she exhibited a set of even, white and strong teeth. It was a delicious laugh, for her lips were richly tinted, eloquently shaped, and with the moist appearance of fresh, ripe strawberries. Her voice was clear and golden in its timbre; when she read aloud, as she did at times to her grandmother, she entered into the subject with all the variety and true instinct of a natural actress. Her complexion was fair, and only slightly tinted in the cheeks with the delicate bloom of perfect health. Her hair was massive and of a golden russet shade like a beech leaf in autumn.

This was the appearance of Beatrice Gray on the day when Arnold Kirklock was carried into her grandmother's cottage, a physical wreck all but the face, which, fortunately or unfortunately, had been spared. She was slender and flat-chested as girls of sixteen should be, but her shoulders were wide, and her figure as straight as a well-trained sapling.

Of course there was no laughter nor loud speaking in Ivydene Cottage during the long weeks that the young man lay trembling on the verge of eternity. She might have laughed and sung her loudest without disturbing him, but the sight of that white, handsome, dead-looking face chilled her young blood and subdued her spirits. She looked at him with pity, blent with fearsome admiration, as one does on a beautiful corpse. He breathed so feebly

IN THE COTTAGE

that the action could not be observed. Timidly she crept on tiptoe through the house, speaking with hushed and trembling accents. That still presence in the bedroom transformed the cottage into a sanctuary.

For the first month, Beatrice had but little trouble with her patient. He remained passive, and required nothing beyond what the doctor administered to him. Yet she sponged his face, and kept his hair in order, and waited for the first moan of pain which he would utter.

Meantime Nature was working silently but industriously, joining the snapped bones, and replacing the battered atoms of flesh and ligaments with fresh material. It had been a tremendous smash, but yet the lightness and elasticity of youth prevented it from being quite fatal. That open portion of the wall on the opposite side of the road, with the vegetation filling it, into which he had rebounded, alone saved the young man from instant death.

Bones were broken and flesh bruised, but none of the internal organs were seriously injured, although terribly strained by the sudden shock. Therefore, from the moment he was laid down where he could rest, Nature began her work.

By the time he could move and groan, his cure was advanced past the first stages. The excruciating pains which he felt were all signs of returning vitality. Then came the fever which swept the diseased atoms from his system and made a new body. When he lay for the second time weak and helpless as a newborn infant, Arnold Kirklock was almost completely born again.

During these long months his face filled the whole thoughts of Beatrice Gray, as his presence filled the house. The reflex of that still, set face, and the serene, beautiful and waxen head lay for ever in her mind. It was only the face like the mask of some dead saint or hero that she saw, absent or present—the head and neck trailing off into an indefinite white cloud of obliterating bed-clothes.

Beatrice was able to think upon the beauty of that mask calmly, with its covered eyes and emotionless stillness. She had not yet seen the eyes, although from the colour of the skin and hair she guessed they would be brown or

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black. He was the first young man she had been so close to in her life; the handsomest she had ever looked at. She was able to look as much as she liked on this handsome face; able also to comb and brush the hair and moustache, and bathe the white face. There was no need to feel shy or timid when with him, any more than she would have been with a lifeless effigy.

She had drawn him when he first came in her sketch-book, while his cheeks and chin were smooth. As the dark beard began to grow, and change the outline of that face, she made daily sketches, watching the daily growth of that stubble with as keen interest as she had formerly taken in her garden. Every line and shade became familiar to her, as her own face.

At first she was sorry to see that rough, ugly shade come over the cheeks and chin, and wished she could have been able to use a razor and clean it all away. It spoiled that beauty so much. But afterwards, when it grew longer, began to curl and look silky, she became proud of it, as if it had been something of her own, and while she brushed it and kept it in order to suit her own taste, she thought him handsomer than ever. She began to long now for the lids to unclothe as she always did for the buds to unfold. This excited her as a coming pleasure.

Her grandmother saw nothing dangerous in this constant association of Beatrice with this harmless stranger. To old people children grow slowly. Imagination is dulled with age, and they have forgotten the tricks it played with their own youth.

After a time the doctor told them that the stranger was not likely to die of his accident. That assurance made them all happy, both in the cottage and throughout the village. Arnold's progress was now the principal topic of conversation. It was like a miracle to these rough villagers, and from that moment they accepted him as a kind of native, for he was the first who had survived Breakneck Hill, and broken its evil reputation.

One morning, after Beatrice had made his toilet, Arnold Kirklock opened his eyes and looked at her. It was only a momentary unfolding of the lids, which immediately

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dropped again. There was also no life nor expression in the eyes, but she saw their colour, and at the long-desired sight a flush of vivid red laved over her face, while her heart throbbed with excitement.

Quickly she ran to tell her grandmother and the servant her good news with childish glee.

‘He has opened his eyes, granny. ‘They are jet black eyes, Sarah.’

These glad tidings were quickly spread through the village, and everyone rejoiced.

CHAPTER III

DRIFTING

As the spring advanced, the invalid made more rapid recovery ; there is a bond of sympathy between all that lives—animate and inanimate.

When the sap begins to rise in the tree and shrub, the blood moves faster in the throbbing veins of animals. Wounds fester in autumn ; they heal in spring. Fibres are shooting out in every direction ; green leaves and buds are bursting from dead-looking knobs. Nature wakes from her long winter's slumber, and moves actively from the *débris* of autumn's decay.

During the changeful months of April and May, Arnold Kirklock had been able to leave his bed for a roomy and cosy arm-chair by the fireside. He had to be supported as he moved on his crutches by the strong arm of Sarah, and his pillows smoothed by the defter hands of Beatrice.

It was a slow recovery, but the doctor could now assure him that it would be a complete one, with care and patience.

Arnold was in no hurry to return to the world he had left. He had never led so peaceful and virtuous a life before. Everything about him went like clockwork, and in unison with the joining together of his fractured frame. He slept a great deal, more than two-thirds of the twenty-four hours. He had all that he desired *at present* during his wakeful hours—nicely-cooked dishes suitable to his condition, the tenderest of fowls, the freshest of eggs and fish, the most delectable butter and milk, and the sacrifice of a household to his exactions.

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That he required no other distractions nor company beyond that of his nurses he had conclusively proved to his own satisfaction by the irritation and unrest which the brief visits of his sister caused him. During the long months of summer, autumn and winter she had come half-a-dozen times, and upset the economy of the cottage for a few hours each visit. Fortunately, like those of the angels, they were few and far between.

Miss Kirklock, when she came, filled Ivydene Cottage with the perfumes of Bond Street, and the soul of Beatrice with discontent at her Paris creations in costume. She was well-meaning, but not adapted for the atmosphere of a sick chamber. Arnold felt uncomfortable while she was present, and feverish after she had departed. She came like a blotch of vivid, untuned colour into the gentle harmonies, and left a general feeling of disturbance behind her, which took days to remove. His spirit at present was attuned to simplicity and chicken broth, and the spiced suggestions of Mayfair offended his newly-born instincts of naturalism.

Had the robust Sarah and her frail mistress been his only attendants, the monotony of this bucolic existence might have wearied him when he began to pick up strength. But Beatrice was there, with her fresh young beauty, to comfort his eyes and stimulate his languid curiosity. Propinquity and hourly intercourse had removed all restraints. He could not move without her assistance. He was helpless still, and she had seen him when an infant could have mastered him, therefore she had neither fear nor shyness when with him, but treated him with the freedom of a relative and a protectress.

Arnold Kirklock accepted this position with the persistence and inconsequence of a child. He taxed her strength and endurance with his demands, asked her to read to him when he felt inclined to listen; to come to him and sit beside him when he wanted company, without a thought that he was presuming on her good-nature or her time.

This sublime selfishness of the invalid imposed both upon her and her grandmother. His convalescence depended upon their acquiescence to his moods; time and custom made him a privileged intruder into their lives, and

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there was no question of propriety, where he was concerned, to interfere with this uninterrupted familiarity.

As summer came on, and he grew strong enough to move without his crutches, take short walks and long drives, it was Beatrice who accompanied him everywhere and always. No one in the village saw anything amiss about this constant companionship of these two young people. The grandmother was too infirm to make a third. Sarah had her household duties, and the villagers took it as a matter of course. Not a soul thought of courtship between the pair, any more than Beatrice did. When he was strong enough he would go away, and there would be the end. It no more struck the mind of anyone that love might be the outcome of this close companionship than it would have been between brother and sister.

The reason of this singular lack of forethought lay in the fact that he was still regarded by these robust rustics as a confirmed invalid, therefore quite out of the lists. They had grown accustomed to him in this helpless and impotent character. They had seen him hobbling slowly on his crutches to take the air, with the arm of Miss Beatrice supporting his uncertain steps and feeble frame. They had seen him still leaning on her young arm when he had left off the crutches and taken to his stick. They would never be able to see him in any other aspect than that of a helpless invalid, and to them a young woman wanted a man to lean upon, not an invalid to support.

But he was waxing strong for all these mistaken and fixed impressions, although he still kept up the *rôle* of invalid, and chained Beatrice to his side. The vapid diet of fish, fowl, fresh eggs and milk no longer satisfied him. The butcher was now laid under contribution, and steaks, chops and roasted beef came into his daily courses, with champagne, claret and brandy. Sarah had more dishes to prepare for dinner, while the aroma of tobacco imparted a more pungent and man-like flavour to the homely cottage.

He was quite well enough to make a move by the end of July, but he made no movement, nor did he express any desire to quit his pleasant quarters.

They were so used also by this time to his presence that

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it would have seemed a great loss if he had gone away. He had sent for books, fishing-tackle and the other necessities to a wealthy man's life, and transformed the bed and sitting-room into a young man's comfortable den. He had the run of the house as a son and brother might have, and the widow treated him in this light.

There was no question of money between them. Arnold was too much of a gentleman in his instincts to insult these benefactors by any such arrangements. His entire fortune would not have repaid the debt he owed these devoted friends; besides, they had sufficiency of this world's goods. He had discrimination and refinement to keep to his position as debtor and leave the future to its own development.

So he drifted along pleasantly; walked, fished, drove, read and sang with Beatrice without a single consideration. He was in love with her, without giving the matter any consideration. They were too much together and too unrestrained for any love-making to go on as yet. They met in the morning and spent nearly all day in each other's company. There were no rivals to wake them up to apprehension, and he grew so gradually from utter helplessness to dominant strength, while both glided from stage to stage so perceptibly, that she was now being supported and controlled, where before she had given her support and control. Neither did her grandmother nor Sarah, the maid, observe this gradual change of position.

The doctor had long ceased to visit them, except as a gossip and friend, and Arnold, with his bright, sociable manner and lavishness, was a general favourite in the village. He was always full of projects for fresh pleasures and the planning out of excursions for the next day; and as Beatrice was always included in these plans, she humoured him as she had ever done. She never considered that now she was always going his way, where before he had followed her; that she was being dominated, where before she had controlled. It had all come to pass so naturally that she fell into her place and never observed the difference. He had asked for things when he was ill and got them. He still pursued the same course, with the same assurance of getting all he wanted, and he was never disappointed.

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He seemed to have forgotten all about his former life and its interests. When he received letters forwarded from his clubs, or directly from his old acquaintances, he read them and tossed them aside with indifference. He hated letter-writing, and when he had to reply he would use the willing Beatrice as his amanuensis, and dictate to her from his arm-chair. This he had done while he was too feeble to use the pen, and he still continued the indolent habit.

In this fashion the young lady seemed to get into the inner life of this young gentleman. A very harmless and aimless life it appeared to be from the correspondence which he kept up with her aid, although some of his dictated instructions to his man-servant seemed rather vague and meaningless. This man-servant occasionally ran down to see his master, and interviewed him with closed doors, but he always caught the next train back to town, and never caused any trouble in the cottage. He was a quiet, thin-jawed, yellow-faced man of about thirty-three, very sedate and respectful in his manner, who glided in softly with a small bag in his hand, delivered his messages, took his instructions, and was off again in the shortest space of time, half an hour generally sufficed for these confidential interviews between master and man.

Possibly Mr Arnold Kirklock had no intrigues to trouble him at this period while he was resting on his oars; or, if he had, his discreet man-servant managed them during his absence, as he looked after the other city affairs. The letters which Beatrice was called upon to answer were frivolous and chaste enough to have emanated from her old boarding-school at Exeter.

It was a most insidious intimacy, which might end tamely or otherwise, according to accident. They were both floating on a smooth and sluggish current, with a cloudless space above them and a monotonous mental landscape all round.

All these months, during which they had so many opportunities of studying each other, they had neither seen under the surface. He knew every trick of her artless and pretty ways. Her fresh and budding beauty he had watched with languid admiration, but without any deeper emotion. It

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required a rival or some sudden change to wake up his slumbering passions, which lay as yet like baby tigers nurtured on milk.

One afternoon they had gone together into the woods, she to sketch, he to lie idly on the dry grass and smoke while she painted. They were so used to each other now that conversation was no longer a necessity, and they might have been of the same sex as far as emotion was concerned.

It was the third week in July, more than a year since he had ridden over that hill. The day was excessively sultry, but by no means too warm for him, although Beatrice was flushed under her sun-bonnet. They walked slowly through fields glowing with poppies, marguerites and cornflowers, while the heavy, ripening ears drooped whitely on their slender stalks. Where the hay had been cut and removed the meadows were grey and dusty. The woods were ancient and well-preserved, with smooth, lawn-like turf underfoot and gnarled, densely-clad branches overhead. Shady avenues led into bush-green vistas and mossy banks, where the foxgloves grew to a majestic height. A shallow and half-dried brook meandered over its sandy bed like clear amber. It was a sylvan scene, suggestive of Robin Hood and his Maid Marion.

Out of the sunbeams and on the overhanging banks of this tiny stream Beatrice found the spot she wanted. There was no need to open her sketching-stool, for the grass, although green and cool, was dry and soft as a well-aired rug.

The subject which Beatrice had chosen to sketch was an old mill-wheel which stood by the side of a broken weir. It had not been in use for many years, and therefore was in the proper state of dilapidation to make a good picture. What remained of the mill was past repair; window-frames rotten and glassless, boards hanging loosely from the sides, and only kept from falling by the ivy tendrils which had gripped them; doorways black and gaping like cavern entrances, with the woodbine and other creepers breaking the square outlines. Buried in the heart of this dense wood, it was a favourite haunt for artists, and even a novice could hardly fail to make an interesting reproduction of it.

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On this afternoon they had the spot and the picture all to themselves, and while she sat with her block on her lap and her paint-box between them, Arnold lay stretched full length beside her, watching her face dreamily as he sent out blue rings of smoke from his cigar.

CHAPTER IV

THE MILL IN THE WOOD

It is pleasant to lie, doing nothing, on a hot summer day, under the shade of Nature's umbrella; a pleasure which becomes intensified when the cigar is good and the companion young, beautiful and agreeable, that is, one requiring no exertion nor entertainment.

The conditions were all that a young man of Arnold's disposition and present mood could desire. Beatrice had eyes only for the sketch she was intent upon, and she was so familiar with her companion that his presence was no more restraint upon her spirits than if he had been a sheep dog. She chattered away as she worked, without expecting any reply, warbled snatches of songs in her full, rich voice, held out her sketch at arm's length to see the effect, or to show him her progress now and then, and acted as only a happy, whole-hearted girl of seventeen could act, who had not a care in the world. On this afternoon she was singularly light-hearted and merry.

They were embowered in varied greens. In the open and dry portions of the land the leaves had lost a great deal of their colour, but here in the woods they were still fresh and juicy. Above their heads soared reaches of translucent vividness, delicious and rich films of vegetation through which the bright light filtered softly and tenderly. Behind the mill and weir the woods receded in fumes of ardent purple, while blended with the twittering of birds came that hushed murmur of the running brook.

Arnold lay on his back, vestless and with his Norfolk

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jacket open, a black silk band was round his waist, and a crimson necktie falling loosely over the front of his blue shirt. His clasped hands were under his bare head, so that as he turned his dark face in her direction he was able to watch her profile without exertion. His cigar was one of the finest for outdoor smoking, and made him dreamy and speculative. He had watched her so often before from this recumbent position, that she had become used to it, and therefore was not in the least disturbed by the fixed scrutiny. She continued her work and her singing quite unconscious.

How pure and fresh that profile looked against that ardent background! It was the first time that her exquisite and delicate loveliness and womanhood had touched him. He began to study her in a new way. She wore a light blue linen blouse with a dark skirt, and, as he had done, she had laid aside her head covering. Now, as she bent over her work, he was able to see to full advantage her rich auburn tresses, with the loose strands which gleamed like ruddy gold at the edges.

His eyes wandered from her face to her figure, and as he looked he made discoveries which caused his dark eyes to gleam brighter and his blood to tingle.

Her breasts were fuller and rounder than they had seemed before; it was the thinness of the material which revealed them and her arms more on this afternoon, but at the sight a languid desire woke within him, and he began to think of her as a woman, where before he had only regarded her as a child.

Then for the first time he likewise began to think upon the advisability of taking his departure from this temptation. She was an adorable creature, and in her manner every bit as perfect a lady as any other of her sex. But socially to court her with a view to marriage was not to be considered, while to woo her in any other way would be a crime too infamous for him to contemplate calmly, considering the deep debt he owed to her and her grandmother. Yes, with the sensations which were now beginning to possess him, it was clearly his duty to go away soon and leave that household in peace.

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These reflections passed sluggishly through his mind as he lay watching her and studying her beauty. He felt that he would miss her very much at first, and look back with genuine regret upon these months of rest. Would she miss him as much? He felt that he would like to know this, but he resolved that he would not try to find out. The best course to take would be to go up to town in a few days and stay for a few weeks, then come back and bid them farewell; this would get them all accustomed to the separation which was inevitable.

As he regarded that bright, smiling, girlish face, he came to the conclusion that his absence would not disturb its serenity greatly. She was much too careless and free with him to regard him very tenderly. Her heart was yet untouched. On this point he felt pretty well convinced, yet the conviction did not increase his peace of mind.

Meantime the afternoon advanced, with her sketch, and the atmosphere grew more sultry and airless. A great hush seemed to settle on the woods, so that even the birds became silent, and only the low trickle of the water falling over the weir was heard.

This hush appeared to infect Beatrice unconsciously, for her voice had ceased, although she still worked on pensively, and with a little droop of her mouth. Not a leaf moved about them. Nature seemed to pause as if upon some change, while a gentle drowsiness was beginning to weigh upon his lids.

Suddenly a vivid flash of lightning darted upon them, followed almost immediately by a loud rumble of thunder. Beatrice started up with a shrill cry of fear, while her block fell to the ground. At the sound Arnold also leaped to his feet, and then stooped to pick up her materials.

'Oh, what shall we do?' she cried, pressing her hand to her head, 'I am so horribly afraid of thunder and lightning.'

Arnold could see that she was in a panic, for her face had blanched, and her eyes were staring wildly. He could see also that they must act promptly if they were to escape a thorough drenching, for already the first heavy drops of rain were pattering on the outer leaves.

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‘Come, let us take shelter in the mill,’ he said, as he clutched up his own hat and her bonnet; then, taking her arm, he began to run over the intervening space.

They had not taken three steps when the second blaze flashed round them, leaving them almost blinded in the wood, now getting rapidly dark. He was not the least afraid himself; indeed, the storm only exhilarated him, but with her it was otherwise. With a shriek of horror she seized him round the neck, and clung frantically to him, unable to move a step farther.

‘Come, Beatrice, courage. Let us get inside, where you will be safe,’ he whispered, putting his arm round her waist, and trying to urge her forward.

But she was paralysed, and only hung like a dead weight upon him, wild tremors passing over her body, and totally unable to move. Before the third flash came he had lifted her up, and ran swiftly with her into the blackness of that open doorway.

The thunderstorm had lasted for an hour, then it rolled away, and the sun came out, glistening upon a myriad drops and threads of water. The stream had grown bigger and muddy-tinted as it poured over the weir by the side of the mill.

Inside that mill brooded gloom unutterable. Bistre shadows concealed the corners and rafters, while the shafts of light from the window holes, dislodged tiles and gaping boards, were half-obscurcd by heavy cobwebs, spangled with skeleton leaves and other accumulations of time.

Dead, dank leaves and dust, with other woodland *débris*, carpeted the floors, shelves and window sills. On the roughened and mildewed stone gables lay white patches of crumbling mortar and dust-stained flour; these shone lividly amidst the dingy obscurity like the leprous whiteness of a gangrened sore. It was the abode of cureless decay.

On the broken steps of the ladder which led up to the former grain loft, Beatrice was sitting, regardless of the dust and stains which clung to her skirt. Her right elbow rested on her drawn-up knees, and her drooping forehead rested

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on that hand, while from her eyes the big tears rolled unheeded over her pallid cheeks. She was weeping silently, and sitting like a picture of passive despair.

Leaning on the side of the ladder and bending over her was Arnold Kirklock, his mouth close to her left ear, while he pressed her left hand within his against his breast, his other arm was round her neck, with the fingers toying amongst her loosened tresses. He was whispering fond and soothing words into that heedless ear, while he occasionally kissed the wet cheek nearest to him and the hair that lay between.

The words he uttered were incoherent and jerky, and the kisses and caresses which he bestowed were forced and without warmth. A sombre expression brooded in his dark eyes, while his face and lips were as colourless as hers. At times also he ground his white teeth and gnawed his bloodless lips as if with impotent fury.

‘Come, rouse up, Beatrice, the rain has ceased, and it is getting late. We must be going, darling, or your grandmother will think that something has happened to us.’

At the mention of her grandmother a violent shudder passed over the girl, then she drew her left hand from his, and, getting out her handkerchief, she wiped her eyes and face, as wearily she made an effort to rise.

As she did so, he slipped his arm from her shoulder to her waist, and helped her up, clasping her closely to him as she stood at his side with her head turned from him.

For a moment they remained in this attitude, her head drooping on his breast, and her brimming eyes hidden by her red lids, then she turned round and looked at him.

Such a look of hopeless despair that his black eyes shifted in a cowardly fashion from that blurred gaze and fixed themselves on the open window doggedly.

‘Oh, Arnold!’

He turned, quickly passing his other arm behind her head and kissed her quivering, cold lips. With a dreary moan she yielded to his embrace and kiss, and thus

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clasped let him lead her from that fatal abode of despair. Outside he released her, and as she still wiped her eyes he began, with his handkerchief, to remove the dust and cobwebs from her dress and his own clothes; while he did this, mechanically she put up her hands and tidied her hair, no word passing between them during this operation.

‘Where is my bonnet?’ she asked in a dull voice, looking vaguely in front of her at the glistening leaves.

Arnold, who had forgotten it, returned to the ruin, and found it lying on the ground, crushed and soiled. He came back dusting it and doing his best to restore it to its former condition. Beatrice took it from his hands, and put it on carelessly, then, without looking at him or asking what he had done with her painting materials, she began to walk through the drenched grass in the direction of her home.

As she went on, getting her shoes wet and her skirts dragged, without seemingly being conscious of the fact, for she made no effort to avoid the slushiest places, he followed in her dragging wake like a mute at a funeral. Her face, which he could not see, was drawn and woe-begone, and looked older by ten years. Her eyes were dark and blank now that her tears had ceased, and her gait was lifeless. On his face a sullen gloom had settled, which looked like a blending of shame, remorse and discontent. Thus they went on, under the arching branches and leaves, which dripped heavy raindrops upon them, and along the bank of the stream, which now rushed, yellow-tinted, round the stones.

As they passed the place where she had been sketching, he saw her closed camp-stool lying where they had left it. He lifted it up, and put it under his arm. As he did so the happy picture of what she had been then flashed upon him, and he groaned deeply as his glance took her in now. At that moment he felt as a murderer might when looking on his victim. It was a moment of hell, during which he hated her and himself with a murderous loathing.

Just before they emerged from the shade of the wood

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to the open fields, over which the mellow sunbeams were gloating, Beatrice stooped, and, dipping her handkerchief in the stream, bathed and wiped her face. While she did this he waited two paces behind, then he stepped forward and laid his hand on her arm. She turned upon him swiftly with a blaze of passionate rage in her eyes.

‘Don’t touch me—don’t speak to me, you coward,’ she cried with concentrated fury.

‘Forgive me, Beatrice. I am so sorry,’ he replied, humbly.

‘Ha!’ she answered, with a fierce, short laugh as she shook off his hand. ‘We need not speak about that now. Let us get home as quickly as we can.’

For the rest of the way she walked on rapidly, with her gaze fixed in front of her, while he kept up meekly with her. They met no one on the road, and when they reached the cottage, she went straight to her bedroom, while he turned into the sitting-room.

He took the paint-box and sketch-block from his pocket, and placed them with the folded stool on the table. As he did so he looked at the sketch, and noticed that a drop of rain had fallen upon it and blurred the lower part of the mill. The dark, open doorway now looked as if it had been boarded over. With a muttered oath he flung the block face downward, and, sinking into the easy-chair, commenced gnawing savagely at his moustache.

CHAPTER V

A GOOD RESOLVE

As Arnold Kirklock still sat gazing moodily at the fire-screen in front of the empty grate, Sarah entered with a filled tray to set the table for supper. She smiled upon him cheerily, and remarked about the thunderstorm, which, she said, had upset Miss Beatrice.

'She is mortally feared for thunder and lightning, and it was a blessing she had you beside her at the time, poor child.'

'Is she all right now?' inquired Arnold, rising from the arm-chair and stretching himself.

'No, nor will she be till to-morrow. It always shakes her nerves and leaves her with a bad headache. Her mother got a bad scare once before Beatrice was born, which may account for it.'

'Possibly,' replied Arnold. 'Miss Beatrice certainly was frightened this afternoon. I suppose she has gone to bed.'

'Yes,' answered Sarah.

The young man felt relieved when he heard that he would not meet her again that night. The thunderstorm had accounted for her agitation. He would now have a night to think and plan out things before he faced her again.

While Sarah was preparing the table he went into his bedroom and had a wash and a brush, then he returned to the room to find that he was to dine alone. Mrs Gray had been ailing for some days, and was unable to leave her room. This pleased him also as much as the absence of Beatrice.

A GOOD RESOLVE

After supper he strolled down to the Post Office and sent a telegram off to his man. After this he idled along the beach until dark, smoking and thinking deeply. What he had vaguely meditated upon during the afternoon he had now determined—to leave Deepwold and return to his former haunts.

He wished, with remorseful regret, that he had done so sooner, but perhaps it was not too late, at least only more harm must come if he stayed any longer.

His telegram to his valet had been worded carefully, so that he alone would understand what was wanted. Next morning he would receive a reply requesting his presence on some urgent business. That would allow him to escape quickly and quietly out of the unpleasant predicament.

To escape without any explanation or fuss was his sole desire now. It is a general weakness with the modern young man to avoid scenes by any possible and cowardly expedient. Before he had consumed his second cigar this appeared to be most clearly his duty to himself as well as to Beatrice. She did not seem to care for him, and after a time she would forget. Yes, he would sneak away as soon as he got his telegram, and close that unfortunate chapter abruptly.

Considerably lighter in spirits, although by no means happy, Arnold returned to the cottage, and went straight-way to bed.

Next morning he lay awake until he heard the postman's knock, and afterwards that of the telegraph messenger, then he waited until Sarah brought the buff-tinted envelope to him.

'How is Miss Beatrice this morning, Sarah?'

'She is better, but Mrs Gray is not. Are you going to get up now, sir?'

'Yes, Sarah. I shall be down presently.'

When he got down to breakfast he found only Sarah there, who informed him that her young lady had gone out for a walk.

'She did not look very bright this morning, so I told her to go out and take the air,' observed Sarah, cheerfully.

Arnold felt easy when he heard this. Perhaps he might manage to get away before Beatrice returned. If he could,

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this would save a deal of bother. He looked at the timetable, and found that a fast train left at twelve o'clock. He would just catch it comfortably after breakfast, as he had nothing to pack.

'I shall have to go up to London this morning, Sarah, for a few days.'

'Will you, sir?' Oh, I am sorry that I sent Miss Beatrice out. She will be so disappointed if you go without saying good-bye.'

Arnold thought not, but he said,—

'Perhaps I shall see her before I go, but if I do not, it will only be for a few days, so that I shall hardly be missed before I return.'

He had no intention of returning quite so soon, if at all, to Ivydene Cottage. He hoped also that Beatrice would not come in before he left; therefore, although he had lots of time, he sat down and made quite a hasty breakfast.

But the fates ordained matters differently to his hopes, and he was not destined to get away quite so easily.

He had just finished his breakfast, and was about to rise, when the door opened, and Beatrice entered. She had come in by the back door, and Sarah had told her the news, therefore she had braced up her courage to see him.

Arnold rose and looked at her, feeling that a very nasty crisis of his life had come. He saw that her morning walk had not restored her colour, and he felt himself also blanching at what was before him.

'Good-morning, Arnold. You are going away, Sarah tells me.'

She spoke gently, and as she looked at him a slight flush stole into her face. He was the most agitated, being the least prepared, and as he trembled slightly, and cast down his looks to his plate, he mumbled,—

'Important business, Beatrice. Unexpected telegram—only for a few days.'

'Do you then intend to come back?'

There was a piteous tremor in her voice as she asked the question that restored much of his lost manhood. He passed over the distance between them, and putting his arm round her, he drew her close to his breast and whispered,—

A GOOD RESOLVE

‘If you will let me come back, Beatrice. If you have forgiven me.’

She made no resistance to his embrace, nor did she attempt to turn away when he raised her head and kissed her. She received embrace and kiss with the meek passivity of the conquered.

‘You have forgiven me, Beatrice, have you not?’

‘Yes, Arnold,’ she breathed so faintly that he just caught the words and no more.

‘Then I shall come back soon, and we will be happy as we were before—before—’

‘Ah! Shall I ever be happy again?’ she wailed, shutting her eyes, while two big tears welled between the lids, and trembled amongst the long lashes.

Arnold kissed the two tears away, protesting that he loved her, and would be true to her all his life. While he was protesting and kissing her into something like her old colour, for her ears now were drinking in all the fond words which she had not heard the afternoon before, came the question that he dreaded to hear.

‘And you will marry me, Arnold?’

He was fond enough of her at that moment, while he held her in his arms, to promise anything, besides, as he reflected even in his ardour, a love promise does not count very seriously in the code of male honour.

‘Of course, my darling.’

‘I thought you would after—after—’

‘All your kindness to me. Why, does not my life belong to you and your grandmother? Could you think me so mean as to draw back now?’

Yes. Even as he said the words, he felt himself to be the meanest wretch unwhipped. But there was no other way out of the difficulty now. By-and-by, with time, he would be able to find an escape. At present, to leave her happy was the kindest and decidedly the pleasantest course he could pursue.

Her eyes were brighter, and she had regained a good deal of her serenity now that her heart became assured about his intentions. All night long she had lain crushed beneath a weight of self-abasement, with that awful secret

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which he only shared, and which she dare not share with any other.

Hitherto she had gone to her grandmother with all her childish troubles, but this consolation was cut from her now. Only Arnold could give her comfort, and he had done so. She was satisfied as far as she could ever be now. He had promised to right the wrong he had done, and be her husband, and she believed him implicitly.

‘I must go now, dearest, or I shall miss my train.’

‘Must you go to-day? Could you not put it off till to-morrow?’

There was no necessity for him to go at all. She looked so charming now she was once more contented, and trusting that he regretted saying that he had to go. The day was so lovely after the rain, that he began to think how much more enjoyable it would be to have her all to himself amongst the woods, than taking that long, hot journey to London by himself.

But he could not think of any excuse for altering his decision, therefore, with a sigh of real regret, he said,—

‘I must go to-day, Beatrice, but I shall come back without fail to-morrow night.’

‘That is a promise, remember, Arnold. The first you have given me.’

It was the second promise he had given her that morning, but as he intended to ignore the first, he inwardly resolved to be faithful to the second and easier one to keep.

‘I shall go to the station with you, Arnold, and see you away. Wait till I get my hat.’

Beatrice had entered the room with slow steps, but she went out of it quickly, with almost, but not quite, her old, girlish liveliness. A subtle change had come over her, making her more sedate, yet adding to her womanly charm in the eyes that followed her movements. She was a beautiful girl, and now Arnold knew by instinct that she would be a matchless woman in a few more years. No, at this moment he felt that he had not the strength to give her up, even if it would never do to marry her.

And yet, why should he not wed this refined girl whose confidence and weakness he had so basely taken advantage

A GOOD RESOLVE

of? She was quite as highly educated as his wife need be, although perhaps a few degrees lower in the social scale. He had sufficient money for both to live comfortably, if not ostentatiously upon, and as a woman, she was one out of a thousand for looks and other intrinsic wifely qualities. To go would be to disgrace her and himself, and rob her of all that made her at present so charming, for as yet she was still guileless and credulous, although no longer the innocent child he had found.

As he stood by the breakfast-table in that quiet, modest room, with the scented woodbine trailing across the open window, and the air outside laden with a hundred perfumes, and filled with the humming of bees and the carolling of birds, his mind wavered. Here all was yet peace and rest. Here he had met with the greatest good and kindness that mortal could have bestowed upon him. He had done a wrong and betrayed his trust, but it rested entirely with him either to magnify that evil into a foul crime, or transform it into a venial offence which would be condoned and have no lasting results.

His two angels were arguing with him at this moment, and inclination sided with his white adviser. Why should he not marry Beatrice and regain his self-respect and peace of mind?

‘Are you ready, Arnold?’

Beatrice came in smiling and once more happy-looking, with her hat on and his dressing-bag in her hand. Trusting in his word, as a child does who has never experienced falseness, she had banished all regrets and disturbing doubts. He had now become her support and the arbitrator of her conscience; she was prepared to fling all responsibilities on him and make his good hers.

– ‘I have put up what you will require while you are away, Arnold. Now we had better go if you must catch the forenoon train.’

It was a wifely action which settled his undecided mind. Her smiling lips, with the new depths and tenderness of her expressive eyes, completed his subjugation; as he caught her to his heart, and *for the first time* felt her responsive kiss thrill over him, he made a silent vow that he would be true to the treasure he had stolen.

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Then his angels retired and left him to the child-woman. The good spirit with a faint sigh of doubt, and 'the evil spirit with a sardonic grin.

Beatrice insisted on carrying his hand-bag, and as it was light he let her have her way. They were both quite happy now, and walked along talking as lovers do. When he came back, and if her grandmother was better, he would speak to her and get her sanction to their engagement. Meanwhile they both decided to keep the secret to themselves.

At the station there were a number of strangers waiting for the train, for it was the height of the summer season, and Deepwold was a good deal patronised by health-seekers. Both Arnold and Beatrice conducted themselves with great circumspection as they also promenaded the platform. They were much more circumspect and guarded on this morning than they would have been had he gone the day previous; however, they did not notice the subtle change.

Two of the visitors attracted the attention of Beatrice, partly because they were watching Arnold rather fixedly, partly owing to the difference in them and the others.

'Do you know that lady, Arnold?'

He followed the direction of her gaze, and answered carelessly,—

'No, never saw her before, although I think I have seen her companion somewhere. He looks like a waiter.'

The lady was round-faced and creamy-complexioned, with dark eyes and tangled hair unmistakably golden dyed. She was extravagantly costumed, and wore a profusion of jewellery. Her companion was a wearied-looking, grey-faced, thin young man, with a meagre moustache. He was looking furtively at Arnold, but dropped his lids quickly when discovered. It was the lady who drew the attention of Beatrice, for she hardly saw the man. There was something about her that filled the girl with a vague distrust and repulsion.

It was only a passing sensation, however, for next moment the train rolled in, and Arnold had taken his place. With a simple hand-shake and a lingering glance the pair were parted, and Beatrice walked slowly past the ticket-collector.

CHAPTER VI

ARNOLD COMES BACK

As Beatrice crossed the dusty highway to get into the shaded lane, she had a glimpse of the train before it disappeared into a tunnel. When it had vanished, leaving only a wreath of white smoke behind, her buoyed-up spirits forsook her, and she felt desolate. It was their first parting, and she was going back to a house filled with the tokens of his occupancy. He had left everything belonging to him behind, except himself.

She belonged to him also now, and must after this think of him before even her grandmother. Ah! since yesterday her good, kind grandmother seemed to have been pushed rudely miles from her by this man, whose personality stood between her and all her past interests.

She felt that she could never touch paints nor handle brushes again; that yesterday sketch was the last spoilt effort she would ever make in that direction. Like that sketch she felt herself also spoilt and blurred, and as she thought upon that unfinished sketch she saw, with a shiver of loathing, the revolting gloom of that interior. There she had buried her self-respect, there she had been robbed of her proud and stainless girlhood. Inside that ruined mill fetters had been placed upon her which galled her soul, and which were never to be broken. She knew now that she had been prepared to receive love if it had come to her quietly and chivalrously. She felt that she had unconsciously loved Arnold from the day he had been laid before her as one dead, *until yesterday*, when all the world became changed and dark. He was no longer the knightly

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ideal which her fancy had created, and she was no longer worthy of that chivalrous ideal. Both had fallen into a sordid slough.

If he had wooed her tenderly as the heroines which she read about are won, he would have been exactly the hero which her fancy could have crowned, then she would have felt like a triumphant and glorified queen; but now what was she in his estimation and her own? An outraged woman who had lost everything worth living for. Her only consolation, and it was a pitiful one, was that Arnold and she were alike. She did not for an instant doubt his affection; that must have been overpowering to make him so utterly forget what was due to her, therefore she had forgiven him after that first gust of hatred. But what appalled her now was, that amid all this wild tumult of abasement, shame and shattered ideals, lay an icy and imperious demand for her heart to love. It was as if revolted nature was being throttled by some foreign adversary.

She must believe in Arnold, that is, she must patch and mend her broken idol, and adore it as she might have done had it not been broken. She had no other to turn to, and must make the best of this one, and resolutely close her eyes to the cracks, since option was taken from her.

She must love Arnold. Must. Love shrank before the harsh brutality and icy condition. It was no longer a free agent, but a whipped and driven slave. With a heart heavy as lead, and desolate as a wind-beaten moor, she walked through the flower-clustered lane with oblivious eyes.

‘Pardon me, Miss Gray, but could you kindly tell me the name of this pretty scarlet flower?’

These words, uttered with an affected softness, such as actresses use when they wish to be extra and graciously polite, recalled Beatrice from her gloomy thoughts. Before her stood the extravagantly-costumed lady she had seen at the station.

She was alone, and smiling in a most seductive and ingratiating fashion, as she held a red flower between her gloved fingers. Beatrice looked at her gravely as she replied,—

‘That is a pimpernel.’

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‘Ah, indeed, how sweetly interesting! I thought it must have a poetic name. You know the delicious lines—

“‘The slender acacia would not shake
One long milk-bloom on the tree;
The white lake-blossom fell on the lake
As the *pimpernel* dozed on the lea.”’

The lady mouthed the lines with such stagey, yet untrained and false emphasis, that Beatrice could hardly control her laughter. This made her forget for the moment her own wretchedness, and feel glad of the interruption.

• ‘Yes, I know “Maud” pretty well, madam—’

‘Mrs Hart-Beachcomber is my name. I have been staying for the past three days at Mrs Greenshaw’s, who has told me all about you and the poor gentleman who met that terrible accident a year ago. I suppose that was the gentleman I saw with you on the platform just now?’

Beatrice bowed her head without answering, while the lady went on grimacing, shrugging her plump shoulders and working her arms in a most extraordinary fashion.

‘Do you know, I could not sleep for two nights after I heard that awful story. I saw him, positively saw him, every time I tried to close my eyes, on his bike, going down the hill, and afterwards lying so white, so still, so pitiable. Ah! what a time you must have had with this poor invalid, and how proud you must be over your success in bringing him back to life and health.’

‘We are naturally pleased at his complete recovery,’ replied Beatrice, a little stiffly, as she walked forward, with Mrs Hart-Beachcomber keeping pace with her.

‘I am so interested in the wild flowers of Devon, although my botanical knowledge is very slight. Mrs Greenshaw tells me you are a great botanist, Miss Gray. May I trust that you will excuse this unconventional introduction, and impart a little of your knowledge to me while I am in Deepwold?’

Beatrice was country-bred, therefore not so formal as town-bred ladies are, and just at this moment she was

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glad of any diversion. To her already Mrs Hart-Beachcomber was diverting, with her artificial gestures, studied utterance, and obvious efforts to act the fine dame. Beatrice was too natural herself not to see the unnaturalism of it all, but it amused her.

She glanced at this new and forced acquaintance shyly, yet keenly, wondering a little what she could be. This dressy person was not a lady, that was apparent even to her unsophisticated senses—at least, not the least like any lady she had been intimate with. Beatrice had not seen many strangers in her life, but the ladies she had known were quite different to this one.

Mrs Hart-Beachcomber looked about twenty-eight; she was of medium height, with a very full bust and an exceedingly braced-in long waist, which made her hips bunched.

Her skin was infantine in its softness, and of that peculiar milky bloom which magnolia bloom imparts. Her eyebrows were carefully trained and pencilled, while her lips were vividly carmine and a little hard at the outer edges. Beatrice was learned enough to guess whence all these advantages came from.

The tresses also, cut short and tangled like an untidy mop, were of a metallic and radiant tint that was not deceptive. Her teeth were even and natural, as could be proved by the gold stopping that glittered in places amongst the whiteness. Beatrice took all these items in with that shy side glance. She saw also that the mouth, when not grinning to show the teeth and the dimples in the soft round cheeks, had a very shark-like curve and droop at the corners. It was a thin yet coarse-lipped mouth, even when pursed in to imitate the rosebud. The nose was unmistakably ugly, slightly slanted to one side, with a flat, broken bridge, and pinched yet wide nostrils. Two lines passed from the edge of the nostrils to the drooping corners of the mouth.

Her eyes were dark and snaky, although fairly large and limpid. They were of an indefinite shade, between dark grey and brown—bistre-tinted eyes; yet they would have been fine eyes, only the effect was spoilt by the lids, which were drawn down at the outer edges. This gave the lady a

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malevolent and hag-like expression, even when she was smiling in her most honeyed fashion. The forehead was fleshy, with fulness behind and above the ears, which were badly shaped. The face was of a very ordinary type in large towns where music-halls are to be found, attractive by reason of its softness to those who do not study details. Self-indulgent and vicious, with a smug self-approval that nothing could rebuke. Each item of dress which she had on had come from Paris, and was of the latest and loudest fashion, while from those fantastic arrangements were wafted the most penetrating and delicate perfumes, which filled the air and completely overpowered the more modest odours of the country flowers.

• Beatrice gazed with wonderment on the dainty hat-creation which crowned those brass-tinted and tangled locks as she asked,—

‘Do you intend to stay long in Deepwold, Mrs Beachcomber?’

‘Hart-Beachcomber, if you please. My name is a double-barrelled one, and I never permit even my dearest friend to take liberties with it—or with me.’

She said this severely, with the air of a Sunday School teacher, while an angry glare came into her eyes. Then she relaxed somewhat in her ridiculous assumption of dignity.

‘Excuse me, Miss Gray, but this is a strong point with me. I have many strong points which I stand up for, and my name is one. The Hart-Beachcombers are an old, a very old, family, and I never overlook slights put upon them. You did not know, of course, therefore we will let it pass this time, only please recollect again to call me by my proper name when you address me.’

She looked at a foxglove which was bending forward as if in grave approval of her dignified reproof, and then at Beatrice suspiciously. Seeing that the girl was looking penitent to keep from laughing, she became gracious once more.

‘Yes, my dear child, I shall probably be here for a month at least, and so we must both become good friends. I like your face. It is honest and truthful like my own.

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Ah! how I abhor liars and all other kinds of deceitful people with which this world is filled. Coarseness and vulgarity is also hateful, don't you think so?'

'Yes,' replied Beatrice, beginning to think that Mrs Hart-Beachcomber was a little touched in the upper storey.

'I knew you would, and, like myself, you are too young yet to care for anything commonplace or base. Ah, ha! I am a keen reader of character. What is your age, my dear?'

'Seventeen,' answered Beatrice.

'Indeed; now I should have taken you to be fully three years older. However, we are near enough of an age to be sympathetic friends. I am five years older, though. Isn't it shocking? Sometimes I feel quite aged.'

Beatrice looked again at this gushing stranger, and smiled gently. She was becoming greatly interested in this lover of truth.

By this time they had approached the cottage, and being unable to shake off this fashionably-dressed lady, Beatrice invited her inside. It was a break in her despondency, and prevented her from brooding; therefore she was not sorry that she saw a great deal of Mrs Hart-Beachcomber, and heard a good many of her philosophical views during that and the following day.

On the second afternoon she went to tea with her new friend, and afterwards for a long, romantic walk on the seashore. When she got back it was nearly ten o'clock, and Arnold had not yet arrived. The next train was not due before midnight. However, she felt that he would return as he had promised; therefore, as Sarah was tired out, she sent her to bed and sat down to wait for him alone.

Mrs Hart-Beachcomber had been quite a new experience to Beatrice, with her surpassing vanity, arrogance and shoddy sentiments. She would retail the most commonplace and trite copy-book headlines as if they were her own composition. She had talked with an air of authority on all sorts of subjects, betraying the most consummate ignorance in all that she spoke about where Beatrice her-

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self had some knowledge. She had related some very dubious stories and scandals about well-known people for a person who plumed herself so smugly on her piety, purity and adoration of refinement; indeed, Beatrice had come back thinking this lady the most puzzling and eccentric person she had yet met. On the whole, however, she had come to the conclusion that Mrs Hart-Beachcomber was neither well-bred, well-educated, nor a very nice person, taking her all round, and that it would be wise to keep her as much at bay as possible during her future stay in the village.

Having seen that Sarah had laid out the supper, put the lights out in the kitchen, and fastened up the back door and windows, Beatrice went to her grandmother's room and found her sleeping quietly. She shut the door gently, and slipped downstairs. It was a warm night, but moonless. After a time the ticking of the hall clock became too loud in the general silence, therefore, lowering the lamp, she opened the front door and went down to the gate to watch for the coming of Arnold.

It did not occur to her that this vigil of hers might be misunderstood by her lover if he came. She was too young, and as yet too little versed in the world's lore to realise unworthy suspicions. It seemed only right that she should wait for him, since her grandmother was ill and Sarah tired.

Her conscience was almost at peace this night, for after looking at and listening to the ethics of Mrs Hart-Beachcomber, the fault did not seem so heinous and hopeless as it had done before. Sentimental discourses from such professors of respectability as Mrs Hart-Beachcomber are apt to have this effect on youthful and unsophisticated minds.

All the village lights were out except that turned-down lamp in the sitting-room. Not a sound was to be heard now except the hooting of the owls from the woods and the washing of the tide on the shingles. The night wind wafted over the young girl softly, and the white stars burned overhead.

He was coming a voice seemed to whisper in her heart

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that thrilled her. Yes, she had forgiven him completely, and placed him once more upon his niche. She would learn to respect him, for to-night she had begun to love him with trembling rapture and in a new way.

The clock had struck twelve, and now she heard the distant whistle of the train. She stretched out her arms eagerly in the direction of the station, and waited with parting lips and shining eyes. Her heart was beating tumultuously, and her breast heaved with anticipation.

He was coming. She heard his light, quick footstep break upon the hushed night. With a joyful cry she sprang forward and was clasped in his arms.

'My darling,' he whispered huskily, as their lips met in a long, passionate kiss. Then, with cheek against cheek, and interlaced, they passed into the cottage.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE WOOD

It was the first week in September, and Mrs Gray was still confined to her bed, with the doctor coming professionally every day to see her. • She was gradually getting worse; the fatal disease from which she had long suffered had taken its last hold, and there was no hope that she would ever rise again. It was only a matter of a few more weeks, or months, before the end came.

Arnold Kirklock was still at the cottage, although during the past three weeks he had been twice to London for three days at a time. On the second visit he had the care of Mrs Hart-Beachcomber as a fellow-passenger both ways. It was all owing to Beatrice, and by her arrangement, that he had taken this charge in hand, therefore she could not grumble even if she had been disposed.

She was once again sick-nurse, as she had been during the past winter and spring, only this time it was her grandmother who claimed her attention instead of a stranger.

Arnold suffered neglect accordingly and unavoidably at her hands, therefore she was glad to know that Mrs Hart-Beachcomber was still on the spot to amuse him with her eccentricities. They had both laughed merrily over the creature's wooden ideas and vulgar arrogance. Arnold said she was good fun and simple-minded. Beatrice was quite satisfied to see her lover amused while she looked after her granny.

They had not yet announced their engagement. Arnold had been eager to do so at first, but Beatrice, in her proud confidence, thought it unnecessary. Her grandmother was too ill to be troubled. By-and-by, before the end came,

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she would tell her that she need not worry as her grandchild's future was all arranged. They would wait now till the end came, and then they could begin the new life. Meantime her grandmother was her first care.

Arnold grumbled a good deal at first to have to spend his days with this frippish woman, whose soul never soared above cosmetics, champagne lunches and French-made dresses. He had served his time before to that kind of woman in London and elsewhere. He dare not even remonstrate, or warn Beatrice against her. He did not suppose she would have understood him even if he had, without too much explanation. Therefore he yielded, and made himself agreeable, at first, very much against his will.

Beatrice hardly ever left the cottage now, except for an hour in the evening when she walked out with Arnold. Also, when her grandmother fell asleep, late at night, and Sarah was out of the way, she crept down to his room. They were happy together. She had no longer any remorse, for custom had blunted her susceptibilities, and she felt he was hers as she was his. Perhaps it was deceit, but she was no longer aware of that. She believed in him utterly, and looked forward to the social contract and the church ceremony as only matters of course and sequence.

She had no jealousy of Mrs Hart-Beachcomber. The woman had a husband of her own, who had once been to visit her. Beatrice thought, in her simplicity, that she only amused Arnold to pass the time and oblige her friend.

One forenoon Beatrice left her grandmother in a quiet sleep, and feeling the need of exercise and fresh air, she walked out alone.

She took the direction of the old mill for the first time since she had gone there with Arnold. Something in her heart made her take that way, for she had no longer any animosity to the ruin. It did not appear such an enemy now as it had done six weeks before.

The trees were growing rusty, but it was warm in the sunlight. How she remembered them when they were fresh and green!

She had reached that part where the old mill appeared, when she suddenly started back and concealed herself

IN THE WOOD

behind a massed trunk. Arnold Kirklock and Mrs Hart-Beachcomber had just emerged from the open doorway, and while she stood he began to brush the dust from her dress with his handkerchief.

Beatrice had not been prepared for this swift revelation of treachery and hopeless depravity. It had come upon her with the suddenness of a tropic cyclone on an unprepared vessel amid a slumbering ocean ; but it tore away every shred of faith and hope and love from her soul, as the cyclone sweeps the unreefed sails.

There had been signs, however, and plain ones also, to read during the past two weeks to a woman of ordinary experience and suspicion. It had only been her own sublime sense of security, honour and loyal faith which had blinded her to the approaching catastrophe. Now, however, that it flashed upon her with such vivid distinctness there could be no possible doubt. It was conviction, clear as crystal, cold and hopeless as death. What was now enacted was only the repetition of what had taken place before, with a change of heroines. Mrs Hart-Beachcomber stood as she had done when the leaves were green.

Beatrice realised now, and for the first time, that it had been a terrible tragedy in her case, while this was only a hideous burlesque, presented by uninterested and poor actors.

Sick and faint, as one who had been struck heavily on the breast, the outraged girl held on with both hands to the sheltering bole. While she grasped and pressed against the tree-trunk she watched that hateful scene through a patch of grey leaves. Her face was bloodless, but a hot glare burned in her dry eyes.

The wanton stood with shameless indifference while Arnold rendered his assistance carelessly and almost contemptuously. As he flicked lightly at the skirt he was evidently uttering a joke, for the woman widened her mouth to a laugh, and exhibited her white teeth ; as she did so, she seemed to glance in the direction where Beatrice stood.

Did she know that the girl whom she had cajoled and dealt with so treacherously was watching her? A thrill of scorn shot through Beatrice at the thought. If so, she was

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not likely to reveal her miserable triumph to her weak-minded partner at that moment.

It was only for an instant that the malignant, cream-tinted face turned in the direction of the tree. The rest of the time that she paused in front of the mill she appeared engrossed in her dress. She shook the skirts vigorously, and turned slowly round before Arnold, while he stood handkerchief in hand examining her. Then, carelessly, he pushed his handkerchief into his pocket, and taking out his cigar-case, selected a cigar and lit it without any more notice of his companion.

They commenced to walk slowly in the direction of Beatrice. Mrs Hart-Beachcomber had placed her hand within the left arm of Arnold, who ungallantly kept that hand in his pocket, while he absently switched at the branches he passed with his cane. She was doing all the talking with her customary vivacity; smiling, ogling him archly, exhibiting her dimples, and playing all her girlish and innocent tricks while she clung to his arm.

He looked unutterably bored, and made no pretence of listening to her chatter. Once or twice she burst into a peel of artificial merriment, and pinched his arm to point some jest she had made, but he never responded, except by a half-frown and palpable curl of his lips. They were near enough for Beatrice to notice this, and a fierce glow of satisfaction passed over her at the sight. The triumph of Mrs Hart-Beachcomber was a paltry one for the price. His treason had not given him much satisfaction.

As they approached, Beatrice shrunk round the tree and drew the brushwood in front of her. She could not see them now, but she was hidden and could hear that falsely-modulated voice and the accompanying switching of the cane.

‘I shall go to town to-morrow, Arnold. I suppose you will be also coming soon?’

‘Yes, I expect so.’

‘I think you ought to leave here as quickly as possible. It isn’t quite fair on that poor girl Beatrice. It may put false notions in her foolish head, you know, dear.’

Her voice had the upright, reproving intonation of the virtuous matron. As Beatrice listened her lip curled viciously.

IN THE WOOD

Arnold, by way of reply, struck at the screen of leaves which hid the listener, and sent a small branch across her face with a stinging lash.

The stroke revived Beatrice as nothing else could have done at that moment. It whipped up her courage, scorn and hatred like a cut does to a man when insulted.

‘Let us stand here a moment, dearest, and take a farewell look, one fond last look at the spot I can never forget; the dear, old, dusty, ruined mill. One gaze again—one long last gaze. Adieu, sweet mill, to thee! Ah, I shall often think of it when far away. Shall you also, I wonder, Arnold? Men soon forget these episodes, I fear, but with us poor women it is not so easy to forget.’

Mrs Hart-Beachcomber was speaking in a quivering and snuffling voice, as if through her nose, while uttering these sentimental words. This was her favourite method of expressing pathos; possibly it sounded tearful and touching in her own ears, although its effect was different to other listeners. It seemed to irritate Arnold very greatly, for he crunched his teeth audibly and lashed at the leaves mercilessly. Fortunately he was now punishing the opposite side of the path, for his sentimental companion had wheeled him round, so that she now stood nearest to Beatrice. The girl could see her white and malignant face plainly as she faced the ruin, for she had passed the tree before she made her second stand, and both Arnold and she were now plainly revealed to the hidden watcher. There was a witchlike, cruel smile on her painted lips as she shot one snaky side glance at the tree. Beatrice knew now that her rival had seen her, and was acting for her special benefit. She also knew that Arnold was all unconscious of her presence, but she hated him no less for that.

‘Oh, curse the mill! Let us get along, Hyacinthine. I am positively starving.’

‘How can you be so coarse, Arnold, so horribly unromantic in this hallowed spot, and in *my* company, too? You shock my susceptibilities dreadfully by such words. Why, every leaf that your cruel cane has torn from the branches appears sacred to me. This spray I must take as a memory since you have severed it from its companions.’

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She stretched out her gloved hand to the screen that covered Beatrice, and picked at a slender twig with some leaves on it which hung broken, but still slightly attached to the branch. The eyes of Beatrice looked straight into hers, hard and glittering with malicious triumph. The watcher held her breath with a desperate fear of what the next move would be.

‘There, Arnold, I shall keep this for your dear sake, and think about to-day whenever I look upon it.’

She placed it carefully in the front of her dress as she mouthed the words, while Arnold looked at her quizzically.

‘Don’t you think one or two of the skeleton leaves which you were admiring so much inside the mill would be a more appropriate reminder, Hyacinthine?’

He puffed out a large ring of smoke, and watched it soar upwards curiously.

‘Ah, yes, dearest, get me some of these pretty skeletons and bring them to me when you come. You will do this, Arnold, won’t you?’

‘Oh, yes, I sha’n’t forget.’

‘And I want another favour from you. Try to get the sketch you told me Miss Gray had taken of the dear old mill. I should like that also as a souvenir.’

‘Damnation!’

‘Sir! What do you mean?’

‘Pardon me, Hyacinthine. I put my cigar wrong end into my mouth just now. Confound the thing, but it was hot.’

He pitched his cigar from him savagely, and turned his face away so that Beatrice could not see it. But she saw the woman’s face darken with quick suspicion, while her drawn-down eyelids puckered.

‘Ah, ha! I have found you out, have I, you wretch? It was not the cigar, but my mention of the sketch which disturbed you.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Miss Slyboots has been inside the mill before me. That is what I mean.’

Arnold turned upon her sternly, with a face set and relentless.

‘Your imagination is too vivid, Mrs Hart-Beachcomber.

IN THE WOOD

I have too great a respect for Miss Gray, and am under too heavy an obligation to her and her grandmother to take her where *you* have been, even if she could have come, which is not possible.'

Beatrice felt almost avenged as she watched the fury that distorted that evil face before her. Mrs Hart-Beachcomber was absolutely panting for breath as she stood glaring on the man who had so ruthlessly insulted her. But he was quite cool now, and laughed easily.

'There is no use getting ruffled, my dear Hyacinthine. You are spoiling your pretty face. Come, let us be friends again, and take me to lunch, as you promised. We have to go to the Rector's garden-party, you know, this afternoon.'

'I—I hate you!' she cried, striking him on the cheek with her clenched hand.

'Oh, no, you don't. There, let us kiss and forget, like good children.'

He put his arm round her waist, and kissed her carelessly, in spite of her first resistance. The caress pacified her.

'Then I hate that girl Gray, and you must come with me to town to-morrow.'

'Oh, yes, hate her if you please, Hyacinthine, and I'll run up with you for a few days, only come to luncheon now, for I can think of nothing else at present.'

The tiff was past, and the pair moved quickly out of sight, while Beatrice waited behind like one frozen. By-and-by she managed to walk home, her heart crushed and numb, but with a fixed idea in her mind.

She would never see nor speak to Arnold again. He was dead as far as she was concerned, and as yet she had no regret, for the man she had loved had never been in existence.

Towards Mrs Hart-Beachcomber she had no resentment. Such a woman was utterly beyond her comprehension. Beatrice felt only one sickened desire, and that was to end the entanglement and have liberty to think.

When she reached home she went to her desk and wrote a brief and cold letter. It ran thus :—

'I saw you and Mrs Hart-Beachcomber at the old mill this forenoon, and heard all your conversation afterwards.

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You will understand that no explanation is necessary.
Good-bye for ever.—Yours, etc., BEATRICE GRAY.

‘*P.S.*—I enclose my sketch for you to give to Mrs Beachcomber.’

She tore the sketch from the block roughly, and folding it up to the size of the envelope, placed it and the note inside. Then addressing it, she went calmly into the kitchen and gave it to Sarah.

‘Run down with this to Mrs Greenshaw’s, Sarah, at once, as it is something Mr Kirklock wants. You will find him there.’

Then she walked upstairs to her grandmother’s bedroom as if nothing had happened.

That afternoon Arnold Kirklock and Mrs Hart-Beachcomber went to London together instead of to the Rector’s garden-party. Next morning Beatrice received letters from both fugitives, excusing themselves for going without saying farewell.

Mrs Hart-Beachcomber was full of sentimental gush and thanks for the sweet sketch which she was so sorry had been spoilt somewhat in the folding. She trusted, however, to get it repaired, and that Beatrice would come and see it when it was framed—come for a long visit.

Arnold wrote that he was unfortunately summoned abroad for some months, but he trusted to visit Deepwold on his return. It was a letter meant to show her grandmother, filled with expressions of gratitude for their goodness to him, but no word for herself. She showed these letters to her grandmother, and afterwards destroyed them.

The following morning his manservant came for his master’s luggage. He handed Beatrice a packet with his master’s compliments.

When she opened this packet she found a very handsome diamond bracelet, the sight of which struck her as the branch had done. Truly this cad was utterly beneath contempt.

She put it up again with some other gifts which he had given her, and which she had once treasured. Then, addressing the packet, she gave it to the valet as he was going. She was now at last freed from her bondage.

CHAPTER VIII

MRS HART-BEACHCOMBER AT HOME

It was early in Villa Heloise, that is, close upon noon, and the dainty occupant, Hyacinthine Hart-Beachcomber, had just finished breakfast. She was charmingly arrayed in a very fascinating morning robe of flowered silk, with a quantity of delicate lace about her neck and wrists, and looked fresh, while she smelt fragrantly, for she had only recently come from her bath and dressing-table. It was in the dressing-bedroom where breakfast had been served, and while she sat in a cushioned chair her husband still lingered at the small table.

Hyacinthine was in a bad temper, as she usually was of a morning, particularly when her husband inflicted his unwelcome presence upon her. She had bullyragged her Paris maid so unmercifully that the poor exile had gone down to the kitchen to weep. On the carpet lay the fragment of a tea-cup which she had flung at her husband to relieve her feelings, and which that meek gentleman had prudently ducked, allowing a large alabaster crucifix to arrest the missile.

This crucifix, nearly half life-size, hung within a niche at the side of the luxurious bed. Mrs Hart-Beachcomber had lately been received into the Roman Church, partly to revenge herself on the English clergyman, whom she had quarrelled with, partly to annoy her husband, and partly because it seemed romantic. Like most converts she liked to parade the symbols of her new faith, as could be seen by the other Church ornaments and sacred pictures round the walls, which, like this altar decoration, she had picked

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up cheaply. Mrs Hart-Beachcomber was a thrifty bargain-monger.

On a shelf near the cross reposed a carefully-polished skull, which was slightly out of place in a lady's bedchamber, but she kept it there because it looked an original kind of ornament, and she prided herself on being out of the common.

The other articles of use and ornament were of a style that seemed to denote that Mr Hart-Beachcomber must be a man of considerable wealth. Rich cut-glass toilet-bottles with gold tops, silver-backed brushes, and furniture of the most expensive quality. It was a perfect nest of feminine luxury, with hardly any space to accommodate a male, unless he was accustomed to make himself small and move discreetly.

Mr Hart-Beachcomber had not the appearance of a gentleman of means, although he was modestly dressed ; but he was meek in his demeanour, and looked as if accustomed to moving about gently and not throwing down articles. He was tall, thin, and leaden-faced, with faded crow-blue eyes, and clean shaved, all except on the upper lip, where a few hairs were cultivated to points. As he sat at the table finishing his breakfast, with his head stooping dejectedly and his body resting only on the outer edge of the fragile chair, he looked one of the most shadeless and least aggressive of his sex. His whole appearance was an abject apology for daring to sit at all in the presence of this arrogant and assertively-costumed dame.

She sat with her eyes drawn more than usual down at the corners, and a sullen frown between her brows, impatiently beating her slippered feet on the rug and watching him loweringly, while her lips curled with hating contempt. He kept his looks fixed on the table.

'Are you never going to be done, Richmond?'

He shrugged his shoulders slightly as he rose slowly but carefully.

'I am finished, *Fanny*.'

'Fanny—you beast !' she cried, in a shrill though subdued voice, for she had no wish for her maid to hear her. 'You'll be calling me Wilcox next. Will you never re-

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member that my name is Mrs Hyacinthine Hart-Beachcomber?’

He smiled sadly and deprecatingly as he replied, with a gentleness that sounded a trifle insincere,—

‘I’ll try to remember, Fa—Hyacinthine, I mean, as I shall try to get used to Richmond instead of William. It does sound more aristocratic,’ he continued reflectively. ‘But you know it was Fanny when you were maid to Lady Fabro, as mine was William Wilcox when I looked after his lordship. It is not so long ago either since we were married in the name of Wilcox. Besides, they call me William Wilcox at the club when I am on duty there, so it is excusable if I do forget sometimes.’

If he had not spoken so apologetically these reminiscences might have seemed sardonic mockery at her pitiable vanity. If he was quietly jeering, she was too obtuse to see it in this light. She thought it only stupidity.

‘Oh, heavens! are you never going to forget that hateful club?’

‘It isn’t easy to forget the club when I am there most of my time.’

‘I must get his lordship to use his influence and have you transferred to some other town.’

‘Yes. Perhaps that would be better for us both,’ he replied slowly. ‘Liverpool or Manchester would suit me better than London. Then perhaps you might come and see me sometimes, and not mind being called by your proper name and mixing with my friends.’

‘Never shall you get me to associate with your plebeian riff-raff.’

‘But what were you yourself, Fa—Hyacinthine, before you married me?’ he murmured meekly, but without looking at his wife.

‘Stop that, you fool, or I’ll stab you!’ she cried savagely. ‘A fine mess I made when I married *you*, a common servant, who can find nothing better to do than being the steward of a club. Bah! it’s disgusting. Why was I such a simpleton?’

‘To oblige his lordship, you know, my dear; and he made it worth your while to take a humble fellow like me.’ He

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glanced dejectedly round the room as he drawled out the words, then, with just a little regretful change in his voice, he added, 'And I thought it was because you were fond of me at the time.'

'Fond of you?—fond of a waiter?'

'That is all I can do to keep myself. I wish I was more worthy of—of such a fine lady. But I do manage to keep myself, you know, even if only a waiter.'

'What a foolish, ignorant child I was!' she cried, pathetically casting up her eyes to the crucifix.

'Yes, perhaps so,' he murmured softly.

She looked at him sharply, while he kept his glance still on his boots, then she said abruptly,—

'There is no use crying about spilt milk, I must make the best of a bad bargain, I suppose. I'll get you something to do out of London as soon as possible. Meantime, bring me my shoes and put them on, then clear out as soon as you like, for I am expecting visitors.'

She kicked off her slippers while he kneeled before her with a shoe in his hand. She pushed out her silk-stockinged foot to him.

'You will come and see me sometimes, won't you, Fa—Hyacinthine, if I go away?'

'You stupid clown! Is that the way to put on a lady's shoe?' She lifted her foot and kicked the shoe furiously into his face. 'Get out of my sight, clumsy pig! I'll put them on myself.'

Her husband rose without a word of remonstrance and left her with drooping head. At the door he paused and looked back.

'Will you come and see me, if I consent to leave London, now and then?'

'Yes, yes,' she replied impatiently; 'but not amongst your servants.'

'I'll not ask you to do that; only let me see you sometimes.'

He went out glidingly, so as not to disturb the crowded ornaments on the landing, and abjectly left the house by the tradesmen's door.

'Was ever poor lady tried as I am? with no chance of raising this dolt to my social level. It is maddening,

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and drives me nearly desperate. If he possessed only an ounce of brains I might get him into some post not so disgraceful; or if he was less persistent in his ridiculous fondness he wouldn't be such a nuisance.'

Her trembling maid had been the recipient of this doleful lament. She rejoiced to find her imperious tyrant in the pathetic mood, as it gave the miserable serf a chance of sneaking. Some maids are the rulers of their ladies, but Delphine was too spiritless and too broken down. Like the unfortunate sheep dog in the backyard, she had been thoroughly cowed.

'With my ambitions and my genius, to be fettered to such a base-born clod. What do you think of it, Delphine? Is not my fate frightful?'

'Poor madam, she has much to endure. So beautiful, so superb, so refined, and yet it is needful for madam to have a husband of some sort. Society expects this sacrifice from madam.'

'Yes, child, I admit all that, but such a husband! Is it not enough to give one the blues? Open a small bottle of "dry Monople" for me, like a dear. I must have something to inspire me with strength to bear my heavy cross. Don't go downstairs for it. You will find what is needed at the side of the crucifix, and my toilet-glass will do quite well.'

Delphine knew where to put her hand on the shady side of the alabaster statue, and soon presented a sparkling draught to her mistress.

'Drink the rest of it, Delphine. It will do you good as it has done me,' said the martyr Hyacinthine, as she passed what remained in the glass to her maid. 'Yes, as I was saying, *you* can hardly be expected to understand the horror of my position; to have to tolerate the obnoxious presence of that man who calls me wife—me so high born, and with all the keen susceptibilities of my race revolting against every action of this plebeian. He has not any sympathy with any of my aspirations. He is not able to understand that refinement is as necessary to me as my food. We have not a single idea in common, and he is so hopelessly middle-class.'

'True, madam, I am not capable of understanding all

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your intensities, for my father was only a cabinetmaker, but I can feel a little, for, as madam knows, I have had disappointments. Yet monsieur does not intrude often, and he is not very troublesome when he comes. He also adores madam in his own fashion.'

'Bah ! that is one of my objections to him !'

'That he is not more troublesome, madam ?'

'No, stupid ; but then he pesters me with his vulgar affections. He was always a miserable, underbred fool. Fancy, Delphine, when we were first married he persisted in saying his prayers until I mocked him out of that drivel. Can even *you* fancy anything more ridiculous than that in a young man with his bride.'

Delphine remained silent, not being able to find sympathetic words to suit the occasion. Sycophant as she was, she could not help wishing that heaven had sent her such a husband.

'What dress will madam wear to-day ?'

'Give me my apple-green gown, Delphine, and for goodness sake go down and see who that is ringing the front door bell as if one had no nerves. If it is Miss Trequair bring her up here.'

Delphine was by no means beautiful, nor was she young. Mrs Hart-Beachcomber had a fixed aversion to youthful and attractive maid-servants ; but she was active, humble and long-suffering, also otherwise peculiarly adapted to a house of the dimensions of Villa Heloise.

She was a good cook, handy with her needle, and not above drudgery work. When her mistress abused or even struck her in those sudden gusts of unreasonable fury, Delphine only wept, and never retaliated as an English servant would have done. Her former life had been a hard and joyless one, and although clever enough with her hands, she was one of those unfortunate and abject slaves who seem born to be victimised and ill-treated.

Long-faced and sallow tinted, with small dark eyes and meagre tresses, she was capable of great endurance. In Villa Heloise her energies were not allowed to rust, for she was the only servant kept, and her mistress was not one to spare her, or ever consider if she was tired.

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Her story was a common but sad one. Lured to London by a scoundrel, who had sent her adrift after he had squandered her savings, she had been engaged by Mrs Hart-Beachcomber from a refuge home, to which she had been taken after an abortive attempt at suicide. The action seemed a benevolent one, and won Mrs Hart-Beachcomber some applause from the philanthropic committee. Possibly she had been moved by one of her passing impulses, for she liked to pose as the charitable patroness when the effort did not cost much and the good deed was likely to be advertised.

Delphine's case and history got into the papers, and therefore this charity had been widely advertised. Mrs Hart-Beachcomber had been well rewarded, not only in getting a faithful, honest and handy retainer, but also in securing what was infinitely more useful to her—the approval and countenance of several influential and highly-respected old ladies. This was the original bond between the arrogant mistress and her servile maid.

‘Miss Trequair,’ Delphine announced as she stood aside to allow the new visitor to enter.

CHAPTER IX

THE TRAINING OF GELLERT

You are late as usual, Eva,' cried Hyacinthine, crossly. 'Come here and help me with this gown, now that you have arrived.'

The newcomer flushed to the roots of her fair hair, paused a moment as if about to refuse, and then came forward reluctantly.

'Quick, quick. I am all behind this morning, and I have so much to get through before night. There is Lord Fabro coming to lunch, and after he goes a week's business to arrange before five o'clock tea. You cannot think, surely, how precious is my time, or you would not have presumed to make me wait on your convenience.'

Miss Eva Helen Trequair, private teacher, looked very resentful at her insolent employer, as she stood behind her with folded hands. She was a tall, handsome and ladylike girl of eighteen, with bright blue eyes and pale golden hair, very poorly but neatly dressed. Her present pose showed plainly that she had no intention of being assistant lady's-maid, although her first movement seemed to denote unwilling compliance. Prudence had suggested the first advances. Proper dignity now checked her. The meek Delphine, however, had sprang forward, and was working with deft fingers.

'Twelve o'clock was the hour you appointed, madam, for your lesson. It wants four minutes to twelve now.'

She said this very precisely, evidently regardless now of consequences.

'What, Miss Trequair? Do you mean to tell me that I am a deliberate liar?' cried Hyacinthine, shrilly, as she

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wheeled round from her maid's hands and glared at her teacher.

Miss Trequair did not reply. She only stood grimly upright.

'I say it is half-past twelve, and therefore too late for my lesson.'

Delphine trembled, while the hired tutor still maintained her studied silence as she gazed calmly at the aggressive fury. Then happened what always does when a turbulent bully meets ordinary fortitude. Mrs Hart-Beachcomber lowered her flag to the victor, and turned to take her revenge on her humble slave.

• 'Confound you, Delphine, your fingers are all thumbs this mörning. Get out of my way; you are only spoiling the arrangement and wasting my valuable time.'

She pushed her maid roughly aside, and finished the hooking of her bodice with trembling hands and an anger-distorted face.

'Shall we begin now, Mrs Hart-Beachcomber?'

'No, I have no time this morning; besides, I have come to the conclusion that your style of teaching does not suit me. You are hardly advanced enough yourself to be of much service to me. I have observed that your pronunciation of several words is, to put it gently, rather faulty and out of date. Your grammar also is dubious and difficult to follow, as *you* explain it. I think after this I shall employ a male teacher, and I would advise you to go back to school for a few more seasons before you attempt the rôle of teacher—except to very young children, of course.'

'Good-day, Mrs Hart-Beachcomber.'

'Good-day, Miss Trequair. Come and see me, *as a friend*, when you are this way. I shall always be glad to advise you for your own good.'

The young lady marched to the door as stiffly as a soldier on parade, while Mrs Hart-Beachcomber looked after her with malignant triumph. Then as Miss Trequair descended the stairs she burst into a peal of rude and mocking merriment.

'That will teach the vixen to put on airs with me—ha! ha! ha! I managed to take some of the odious

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conceit out of her pretty nicely. Don't you think, Delphine ?'

'Yes, madam,' answered the maid, timidly.

'Besides, I have only had three lessons out of a fresh course, and I was sick of her dogmatics. She will never dare to send in her bill after that dressing, but if she does I shall ignore it as a piece of gross impertinence. I'll make her regret this day's work before I am done with her. No one insults me with impunity.'

'No, madam, you can be very severe with people when they take advantage of your goodness.'

'I should think so indeed. Why, I have introduced that ungrateful girl to several of my friends, but after this I shall expose her properly.* Now for his lordship ; be sure and prepare a nice lunch, Delphine, for I wish to put him in a good temper.'

'I shall do my utmost, madam ; and if you can spare me I shall go at once to see to it.'

'Very well. Make yourself a little more tidy also to answer the door, and show his lordship into the drawing-room when he comes.'

'Yes, madam.'

When the truth-adoring and generous-minded Hyacinthine spoke of Miss Trequair afterwards, she certainly exposed that young lady's character very thoroughly. She never minced matters when demolishing an enemy. Fortunately, however, her knowledge of Miss Trequair's patrons was extremely limited. She, therefore, was unable to execute quite as much mischief as her spite and malice would have liked, but she did some tarring, even on her limited scale. Restored now to a pleasant and self-satisfied mood, this gentle soul, after a keen glance round the dining and drawing-rooms, went out to her back garden to take the air.

Villa Heloise was one of a double line of bijou residences in the St John's Wood quarter. Small, semi-detached, double-storied houses, with tiny attics above the second flat. They were built on modern art principles, and the scanty space made the utmost of—with a yard or two of garden to the front, a tiny porch at the principal door, and about thirty feet of garden at the back.

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Yellow silk half curtains, fastened with blue ribbons, adorned the front windows, and kept out the prying eyes of the opposite neighbours. Facing the front was the dining-room, an apartment of fifteen feet square, into which was crammed a massive carved oak sideboard, ornate overmantel, Russia leather couch and solid chairs, which almost completely filled all available space. The walls were covered from ceiling to floor with paintings, brackets, bronzes and other *bric-à-brac*, while large Japanese jars filled up the corners. It was as closely packed as a furniture-dealer's shop, while the floor was piled with expensive carpets and rugs. There were three portraits of Mrs Hart-Beachcomber—one full-length, in the character of Mary Queen of Scots, whom Hyacinthine considered she greatly resembled, and two head studies. The faces of these likenesses had, however, been retouched by the fair owner since leaving the hands of the painters. She had taken a few lessons in painting, and added this to her other accomplishments, and as she improved upon and refined the text of Shakespeare in her selections, it was only natural that she should not hold her hand from the work of any modern artist. Her touches and harmonies could not be mistaken in these oil portraits. They imparted a startling piquancy to the original scale of colour.

Cram was the order throughout Villa Heloise—cram and profuse ostentation. The little box-room which also faced the front, and which she dignified by the title of her study, was so filled with furniture that the door could not be closed until the Chippendale chair was pushed under the writing-table.

The five-foot hall was like a museum, with armour, bead-screen, hatstand, hall chairs and a carved black eight-day clock. The drawing-room was situated at the back, and had a French window leading into the garden. It was the same size as the dining-room. Here the effect was gorgeous in the extreme, with gilding, china and Dresden ware, enamel paintings and miniatures, flowered satin-covered chairs, stools and couch, side-tables and whatnots, silk and lace drapery, and a dainty pile carpet. There was enough fragile articles of wealth and extravagant fancy to have

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made the largest drawing-room uncomfortably crowded, without considering the superb grand piano which filled out the centre space.

The garden likewise showed evidences of the lady's love of display in its arrangement. Several marble statues of classical goddesses stood at the borders of the miniature lawn on pedestals, while at the top was a trellised summer-house and a fern grotto under the branches of two small trees. Evergreen bushes lined the sides of the narrow walk which led round the lawn, and every inch of soil had been utilised with plants and creepers.

Here, at the back door, was chained in perpetual captivity a half-grown black and tan sheep dog. It was a pretty and carefully-groomed animal. To keep him tidy was one of the numerous duties of the hard-worked Delphine. But Mrs Hart-Beachcomber attended personally to his training and manners. She prided herself not a little on her training qualities with dogs, children and men, as well as with her own more difficult sex.

She had come out this forenoon to give the young dog, Gellert, his daily lesson in polite behaviour. For this purpose she took from a nail in the hall a gold-mounted dog-whip. Gellert had never seen her without that dainty but useful whip during his brief and miserable existence, and therefore probably fancied that it was part of herself. From his greeting of her, even before he saw her hand, which she kept behind, he must have thought that whips grew on ladies.

He had been lying, stretched at full length, in the sun, with his chain taut before she appeared. Beside him lay a few neglected bones and an over-turned dish of porridge and milk. His water basin he had also upset in his wanton thoughtlessness. Despite his daily chastisement, he had not yet learned to be quite orderly in his habits. But he had managed to control the high and boisterous spirits of puppyhood, and also learnt that barking and romping were sins, so, as the immortal Hans Andersen writes, 'That was something.'

Hyacinthine stole past the kitchen on her tip-toe, with an anticipative smile and a cautionary finger at her lip to

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Delphine. She held her skirts up daintily with the whip hand, and displayed an inch or two of carmine-tinted, open-worked silk stocking coquettishly. She crept along in the manner of the arch and innocent maiden going to surprise her waiting lover. It was a touchingly pretty picture. But Gellert had his ears open, and was not to be taken unawares by any such cunning ruse. Before she had shown her cream-tinted, smiling countenance, he was on his feet with a short, sharp yelp, and scudding towards his kennel with belly close to the ground, dragging hind legs and incurled tail. He knew that Nemesis was on his track.

‘Come here and welcome your kind mistress, you ungrateful brute!’ she cried viciously, dropping her smile with her skirts, and raising her whip.

Gellert seemed of the opinion that he would rather not just at that moment show his devotion. Something inside the kennel called for his immediate attention, and he pushed in frantically, getting the chain round his leg, which unfortunately somewhat frustrated his intention.

‘Ha, you graceless cur! would you try to run from me? Take that, and that, for your wickedness.’

He took *that and that*, with shrill thanks, which appeared to magnify his offence. Seizing the chain, she dragged it, still coiled about his hind leg, until she had him out of his shelter. Then she thrashed him mercilessly, while the neighbourhood rang with his agonised yelps.

It was hot work, and raised her colour considerably, for just as she was getting tired her feet slipped amongst the spilt porridge, and the miserable culprit got his punishment all over again, while he howled, yelped and struggled to escape madly.

At last she was forced to stop by Delphine running out and crying,—

‘Madam, madam, compose yourself. Lord Fabro is in the drawing-room.’

This intelligence brought Hyacinthine to her senses, and with a parting kick at the offender she dropped the chain and stood panting. Then Gellert went into his kennel with an alacrity that was surprising, considering his bruises.

‘I shall shoot that wretched mongrel,’ she gasped, her

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witch-like eyes glaring with fury. This was an unjust epithet of hers, for Gellert was a dog of the purest pedigree, and had cost one of her admirers a big sum, although his present curish behaviour seemed to warrant the calumny.

‘Compose yourself, dear madam, and come inside. Lord Fabro is watching you from the window.’

Hyacinthine cast one angry glance at the drawing-room glass door, where a grey-bearded, grinning face appeared. Then she dashed into the lobby almost as swiftly as Gellert had done into his kennel.

‘Why did you not warn me, you hussy, before you admitted his lordship? You are as bad as that vicious beast, and did it on purpose to humiliate me.’

‘Oh, no, madam. I thought you heard the bell.’

‘Oh, you—you spiteful cat!’

Hyacinthine brought her open palm, with a loud slap, across the sallow face of Delphine, and rushed upstairs to cool herself with some eau-de-cologne.

CHAPTER X

LORD FABRO GETS A PLEASANT SURPRISE

LORD FABRO was standing at the fireplace examining an ivory miniature when Mrs Hart-Beachcomber sailed in. She had washed her hands, anointed her face with magnolia cream and brightened her eyes with a little belladonna, so that she was again presentable.

‘Glad to see your lordship once more,’ she said, advancing with outstretched hand.

‘Ah, how do, Fanny?’ He replaced the miniature on the gilded ornamental shelf, and gave her two fingers and a short nod. ‘You look stunning, my dear; and, by Jove, what a splendid nest you have, to be sure! It quite takes my breath away.’

‘Yes, I have some interesting trifles here. It is a small place, your lordship, but I like good things about me.’

‘So I perceive,’ answered his lordship, dryly.

‘Sit down, my lord. Will you take some refreshment before lunch?’

‘Ah, thanks; a little brandy and soda, since you are so kind.’

Hyacinthine touched the electric button, then she said,—

‘I’d be much obliged if you will not call me Fanny before my servant.’

‘Certainly not, if you don’t like the old familiar. But how may I address you?’

‘I am known as Mrs Hart-Beachcomber, and Hyacinthine to my intimate friends. *You* may call me by my Christian name.’

‘Very good, my dear. Hyacinthine suits your style of beauty admirably; I’ll remember that. You appear to be

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getting on in the world, Hyacinthine. Doing anything in the City?’

‘Yes, I do speculate a little, and have been fairly successful. Delphine, bring brandy, soda and glasses, please.’

Lord Fabro was a gentleman well-advanced in years, of vast estates, and holding an important position in the political arena. In appearance he was tall and portly, with an aristocratic bearing, and possessing a complexion indicative of free living. Yet his finely-cut Norman features, bloated slightly though they were, keen black eyes and broad forehead, displayed a man strong in intellect, if sensual in his habits. His beard, moustache and hair were thickly sprinkled with white. There was a humorous twinkle in his eyes, while he regarded his fair hostess, that showed that he was vastly amused with her and her present surroundings.

As he sparingly helped himself from the decanter of cognac and the syphon of soda, as male connoisseurs generally wisely do when sampling the unknown brands of ladies—of Hyacinthine’s position, he glanced at Delphine and chuckled quietly. She was standing before him with one cheek flushed deep red and the other like old ivory. After she had glided from the room he said,—

‘What an extraordinary taste your maid has in face decoration, Hyacinthine. She seems to have used the hare’s-foot only on one side. Run out of rouge, eh? or have you been acting the fond parent since she admitted me, as you used to do with me, once upon a time?’

‘Yes, she was impertinent,’ answered Hyacinthine, sullenly.

‘Ah! you are quite Elizabethan in your domestic discipline, and make an exemplary mistress and dog-trainer. That is a nice little animal I saw you romping with just now, and you looked charming in your excitement.’

‘He is an ill-conditioned brute, and I intend to have him shot.’

‘Oh, no, don’t do that. He looks too valuable a dog for such a fate.’

‘Yes, his pedigree is all right; but I hate dogs—and cats.’

‘Sell him, then, rather than vex yourself with keeping anything you hate.’

LORD FABRO GETS A PLEASANT SURPRISE

‘I prefer to shoot him, then I know what has become of him, and so am freed from all anxiety concerning his future.’

She uttered the words as if it would have hurt her affectionate feelings to consign Gellert to strange hands, where he might be abused.

‘It is very kind of you, yet it is extremely doubtful that killing him would give you the certain knowledge of his future fate. How much did he cost you?’

‘Fifty guineas,’ promptly replied Mrs Hart-Beachcomber, who began to see the prospect of making a deal out of her wealthy visitor.

‘Indeed! That was a long price for even a good dog. I am afraid the fancier has imposed upon your inexperience and amiability. It is far too costly to turn into a target. Suppose you let me have him instead. You will know then that he is in good keeping, and I will give you ten guineas advance on the original price.’

‘Yes, I will part with Gellert on these conditions. You will stay to lunch, I trust?’

Lord Fabro glanced at the timepiece, and consented; then he said,—

‘Now, my dear friend, why did you send for me? I thought we had agreed after your marriage that any future communication should be made through my lawyers. Have they not sent you your last quarterly allowance?’

‘Oh, yes, thank you; but I wanted to talk to your lordship about something—to consult you upon an important matter that I could not write.’

‘Ah!’ A slight frown crossed his lordship’s brow, leaving him once more urbane.

‘How is your husband? I trust he is kind to you?’

‘Oh, yes; I have nothing to complain about in him, except his position. He wishes to get some other situation out of London.’

‘Indeed! What would he like to do? Keep a public-house somewhere?’

‘He might do that if your lordship would give him a start, or get him into a club in some country town.’

‘I see. You want him out of London?’

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Hyacinthine shrugged her plump shoulders as she replied,—

‘*He* wants to leave London.’

‘I understand. Very well, I’ll think it over and see what can be done to oblige you both.’

At this moment the small gong in the lobby rumbled out, and Hyacinthine rose.

‘Come and have some lunch. I’ll give you my confidence afterwards.’

His lordship rose also, and, replacing the glass, from which he had only taken a sip, he followed her into the dining-room.

The lunch was well chosen, for Hyacinthine knew the tastes of men in food, if her brandy was not quite up to the mark. It began with filleted anchovies decked with radishes, followed by oysters and nicely-cooked cutlets—quite a simple lunch, but daintily served by Delphine, and as good as his lordship could have had at his club. He contented himself with a glass of the dry champagne which Hyacinthine was drinking herself, politely declining her offer of any other wine. When one dines with ladies like Mrs Hart-Beachcomber, it is safer to trust their champagne than their clarets or Burgundies.

His lordship had been placed opposite the full-length Queen Mary portrait with the retouched face. While eating, he glanced at this work several times in a disturbed, baffled kind of way; then, unable to control his annoyance, he asked,—

‘Who painted that portrait?’

‘It is by Werner.’

‘By Jove, is it? You astonish me, Hyacinthine.’

‘Why? It is considered a good likeness of me,’ asked and added Hyacinthine in her severe manner, beginning to glare at her visitor. Lord Fabro became instantly apologetic.

‘Oh, yes, capital likeness, only not too flattering. The lower part and the background are all right and splendidly painted, but what the mischief has he been doing to the face and neck?’

‘Oh, I was not quite satisfied with the face, therefore I improved it a little myself. It wanted freshness.’

LORD FABRO GETS A PLEASANT SURPRISE

‘Oh, I see now what puzzled me before. You put the finishing touches on it. Very good and deuced brave on your part to finish Werner’s work. It is more plucky than many people would have the courage to attempt. You are a daring woman, and quite a genius. I was not aware that you painted—at least, not in oils.’

‘Oh, yes, I sometimes amuse myself that way, and also model in clay. They are pleasant changes from my other more important studies.’

‘You amaze me, Hyacinthine,’ answered Lord Fabro, looking at her with twinkling eyes. ‘Pray tell me about your other accomplishments and studies. You play, of course?’

‘Certainly; that forms one of the branches of my chosen profession.’

‘Profession!’ echoed Lord Fabro, genuinely astonished this time.

Hyacinthine smiled and looked at him archly.

‘Ah, my lord, I have a surprise in store for you. You have no idea what a clever little woman I have become since you knew me last. But let us finish lunch first, and I will tell you all about it over your cigar.’

‘Oh, I always knew you were damnably clever. But come, out with the surprise, for I am now ready for it and a cigar, if you have no objections.’

‘I shall join you with a cigarette.’

She rang a small hand-bell at her side, and when Delphine appeared, ordered coffee.

As they sat smoking she explained her surprise, while Lord Fabro listened indulgently and with exemplary patience. He had been really amused during this visit, and he was prepared to pay for his fun.

‘Well, my lord, I have been studying frightfully hard, and have learnt the art of acting. This is my chosen profession, and I mean to go on the stage.’

‘By Jove! How long has it taken you to master this difficult art?’

‘Six months exactly.’

‘You have done it quickly; but I suppose you have not yet appeared in public?’

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‘Not yet ; but I have every confidence in myself and my immediate success.’

‘Yes, I also think you have *confidence* enough to succeed, but have you considered the slow routine and other difficulties of stage life. Even with the highest histrionic abilities it means years of sordid drudgery and the most insignificant parts.’

‘Your lordship mistakes my purpose utterly,’ answered Mrs Hart-Beachcomber with scorn. ‘I have not the remotest intention of going in for such ignoble drudgery, or wasting years either on the caprice of any theatrical manager. I intend to form a company of my own and play leading parts. Ophelia, Juliet, Lady Teazle and such characters, also original plays. I have already secured my business manager,’ she said sweetly, folding her hands on her lap.

‘Good God ! Fanny—Hyacinthine, I mean—do you know what this is likely to cost you ?’

‘My agent informs me that with five thousand pounds we could make a decent beginning.’

‘Yes, a start, I daresay,’ cried his lordship, impatiently.

‘That is all I shall require. My talents will do the rest.’

‘And where in heaven’s name are you going to raise five thousand pounds ?’

‘I hope your lordship will be kind enough to advance me this sum,’ replied Hyacinthine, calmly, looking at him fixedly with compressed lips.

‘And what if I refuse ?’

‘Then I shall go to Lady Fabro.’

‘And lose your present income of five hundred per annum ?’

‘I am prepared to risk that, my lord, if you are stingy enough to refuse me this slight and *last* favour.’

Her pleasant surprise was at last out, and she now sat waiting on the result with a face like marble. It was a big price her visitor was expected to pay for his entertainment.

Lord Fabro sprang from his chair, pitched his half-smoked cigar on the table-cover, and began to tramp furiously up and down the narrow space. Hyacinthine picked up the cigar and placed it on the ash-tray carefully, then

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she watched his angry movements with an eye to the preservation of her ornaments.

'Take care, my lord, or you will break something valuable.'

'Oh, damn the valuables! You are a regular shark, without even the conscience of a money-lender. Haven't I treated you generously enough already without this last extortion?'

'Five hundred pounds does not go far with a lady of my standing,' she answered meekly. 'That vase which you have just kicked cost me thirty pounds, and I am at present owing my dressmaker nine hundred.'

'Come, be reasonable, and give up this absurd project. I will pay your dressmaker's bill and set your husband up in a first-rate hotel, where you can help him to make a fortune in no time, if you abandon this ruinous idea.'

'You insult me, Lord Fabro. Do you think I would go into a public-house?'

'Much safer and more enjoyable than going on the stage.'

Hyacinthine looked at him in frigid silence. She saw he was frightened at her evil power, and would yield rather than risk exposure on the eve of a dissolution of Parliament. She was right, for after a few more strides he flung himself moodily into the chair.

'You hold me in your power, my girl, and have chosen your time very well. Yes, you are a clever woman, and I must give you that money, I suppose.'

'Oh, thank your lordship. I felt sure you would give me this glorious start in life. Now you must hear me recite while you smoke another cigar. Then you will know that your gift will not be wasted.'

While he sat, the picture of misery, she inflicted upon him a scene from 'Romeo and Juliet,' delivered so atrociously that it set his teeth on edge, and filled him with angry pity for her insensibility, inordinate conceit and ignorance. If this was her best sample, she would be roared from any platform, but he dared not warn her of her certain defeat. He knew her temper of old.

At last the painful ordeal was over, and he drew out his cheque-book with a muffled expression of thanks.

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'I fancy that ought to win over the critics,' she observed in a satisfied tone. 'You noticed that I have altered and improved upon the text in my interpretation.'

'Oh, yes, I took note of that.'

'Shakespeare is so coarse and improper in some of his expressions, and I detest coarseness. I mean to elevate the public taste when I appear.'

'I trust you may succeed. Now let me have pen and ink, and I will write you out a cheque. Only keep the matter dark, as I have no wish for my solicitors to know this present bit of folly.'

'You may depend upon my discretion,' replied Hyacinthine, as she ran eagerly out of the room for the pen and ink.

'Five thousand, I think, is the amount you need for this venture?' Lord Fabro asked when she returned, as he spread out his cheque-book and took up the pen.

'That is the sum required for my company project,' answered Hyacinthine, tenderly. 'There is also my dress-maker's account, and the price of poor Gellert, which you were good enough to—'

His lordship ground out a deep sounding oath which she pretended not to hear, while he filled in and signed the cheque hurriedly.

'There, I have made it six thousand, which must cover everything. Now remember, after this you must be satisfied with your allowance, and not draw on me for any more.'

'Certainly, my lord. I shall be able to manage after this on the five hundred per annum. Would you like to hear me play a piece of music?'

'No more to-day, thank you,' replied his lordship, getting up hastily. 'I have exceeded my time already, and now must run.'

'Well, good-bye. It is just like old times to see you under my roof. You have made me very happy by this pleasant visit, and you won't forget the hotel for my husband. I think he would prefer that to club life.'

Lord Fabro seized his hat from the rack, and bolted from Villa Heloise as if the devil was after him.

CHAPTER XI

GUSHING GIRLIES

HYACINTHINE HART-BEACHCOMBER followed her illustrious visitor to the gate, and as he dashed along the street in the direction of a cab-stand, she waved her small embroidered handkerchief to his retreating back. She was beaming with good nature and affability, and her milky face wreathed in happy smiles.

While she was still watching and smiling, there appeared in the distance two forms which she recognised. Seeing her handkerchief fluttering, they also took out their bits of cambric and waved an answering salute vehemently ; then they hurried forward.

At the distance they looked like young and very thin girls, for their skirts were short and their figures small. But as they approached near enough for the features to take shape, this aspect of youth dropped from them, although their manners still appeared girlish. They both danced forward with skipping feet, tossing their heads and breaking into giggling laughter and shrill cries of girlish delight.

They were a most remarkable pair of diminutive and withered eccentricities, and in dress offered a singular contrast to the Parisian-costumed Hyacinthine. Yet they seemed favourites with her, for she waited upon them with welcoming smiles. Their short frocks were made of cheap art material of several shades, as if fashioned out of patches, and clung about them closely enough to suggest the absence of undergarments. A kind of shoddy imitation of the Grosvenor Gallery, in its sunflower period, had been aimed at in the fashion of these peculiar remnants, which seemed to have been cut for them while in their early teens. Under these

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abbreviated, flimsy skirts, four pipe-shank legs appeared encased in black gaiters, and moving briskly.

The faces, as they neared, were those of old witches, yellow, withered, and rendered more weird and pitiable by the grins and giggles that contorted them. They skipped forward with widespread arms and exclamations of school-girl glee, and in another moment were clinging to that full-bosomed apple-green costume like unstarched rags.

'Ah, Juliet, we are so glad to find you at home. We have had such fun this afternoon, and are dying to tell you all our adventures.'

Hyacinthine was Juliet, from her favourite character, to these gushing, romantic girlies, who had christened her this as a pet name, as they called themselves Iduna (goddess of Youth) and Athena (the goddess of Wisdom). The real names of these romantic maidens were Kiren happuch and Tryphene Hurdle. It was Kiren happuch, the elder by a few years, who had adopted the pet name of Athena, and Tryphene, who was still regarded as a baby in the Hurdle household, who called herself Iduna, and did her best to enact the character.

Athena, although, like her sister, youthful in her demeanour, was of graver tastes and not so frivolous and giddy. She posed as an advanced thinker and student of philosophy. She attended lectures and debating societies, used polysyllables when they could be dragged in, and prided herself on having a sarcastic and keen wit. Emerson, Darwin, Kant, Hegel, and Carlyle were the authors she trotted out whenever she saw a chance. She was also a fervent advocate of Ibsen, Meredith and Browning amongst the lighter writers she patronised, with any new cult that chanced to be talked of for the moment. In appearance she was like a starved crow, sharp and thin features, with eyes always half-closed and lips like pinky threads.

Tryphena, or Iduna, formed a fine contrast to her elder sister, although resembling her somewhat in face and figure. She kept her eyes open in what was meant to be a child-like wonder at everything about her. While her sister was apt to be sarcastic or spiteful in her retorts, Iduna lived in a perpetual state of enthusiasm, and loudly expressed her ad-

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miration. She gushed over everything with exclamations, and superlatives uttered in brassy accents, that were sometimes painfully grating and generally embarrassing to the object enthused over. She affected art, music and poetry of the romantic and sensuous order, and asked questions and made remarks in an unconscious innocence which were apt to raise blushes. She was a charming and most inconsequent *enfant terrible* of about thirty-seven springs.

‘I am so glad you have come just now, my dear Iduna and Athena,’ said Hyacinthine, after the lingering embrace was over, ‘for I have a whole hour to spare before Mr Borrymore, my agent, comes to consult me on business, and I have also great news to tell you, so come inside.’

‘Ah, how excruciatingly delightful to have a whole hour with our Juliet,’ shrieked Iduna, pressing her skinny hands together in her delighted excitement. ‘I just know what you are going to tell us. You have succeeded with your aunt.’

Hyacinthine nodded merrily as she waltzed her two admirers into the drawing-room and forced them into chairs.

‘Yes. It is an accomplished fact at last. My dear old aunt has consented to pay all expenses, and I can now begin my preparations.’

‘To electrify the world with a new Juliet and Ophelia. Oh, how ravishly transporting. It takes my breath quite away. You adorable darling. How can I possibly exist until I see you in your kingdom, and hear your glorious voice ring out and charm the hearts of your worshippers.’

Iduna jumped up, and made a frantic clutch at her smiling hostess, who bore the embrace with sweet composure. Athena meantime put up her eyeglass, and looked with half-closed, critical eyes at the pair. She was not quite such a favourite as her sister with Hyacinthine, as she was less lavish with her praise.

On the present occasion, however, after her young sister had exhausted her vocabulary of adoration, she managed to get in a well-crammed sentence of transcendental and polysyllabic congratulations. This Hyacinthine swallowed sedately, then, for the present satisfied with the united flattery, she remembered that they had something also to tell her.

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‘Now, tell me your news, my dears.’

‘Oh, it is almost too awfully funny to tell, and Athena was so excruciatingly witty. I nearly died with laughing.’

‘What was it, Athena?’

‘Yes, yes. You tell it to Juliet, Athena.’

‘We have just come from an afternoon call on that vulgar person, the wife of Neptune.’

‘Ah, poor, dear Nep, how we all pity him with such a squaw and such a wigwam.’

Poor dear Nep was the painting-master, from whom Hyacinthine had learned to re-touch her own portraits so prettily. Iduna also attended his classes, and had made a god of him for her private Olympia, and immortalised him as Neptune.

‘Ah, so you have seen the mystery at last!’ exclaimed Hyacinthine, clapping her hands. ‘Do tell me what she is like?’

She flung herself full length on the couch as she spoke, in the attitude of Cleopatra when the news came of Antony’s marriage with Octavia.

‘Sit beside me, Iduna, while Athena describes the scene.’

Iduna flopped down upon a footstool, *à la* Charmion, and completed the tableaux.

‘Now report the features of this person. Her years, her inclination, leave not out the colour of her hair.’

Athena fell into the humour of the future empress of stage-land, and recited,—

‘I found her, madam, encompassed by a throng of brats. When she beheld us, she blushed and straight made way.’

‘Is she as tall as I?’

‘She is not, madam. She stoops, and shows a body rather than a life.’

‘Bearest then her face in mind. Is’t long or round?’

‘Round even to faultness.’

‘And so awfully vulgar and underbred. Oh, Juliet, fancy, we met her wheeling her own perambulator,’ cried Iduna with horror, breaking in upon the adaptation.

‘Such a dowdy creature, and so frightfully commonplace.’

‘Then you did not see the house?’ Hyacinthine sat up and became once more matter of fact.

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'Oh, yes,' replied Athena, quietly. 'We had made up our minds to see the wigwam, and were not to be baulked. I need not describe it. You will understand what like it was when I tell you she keeps no servant.'

'A drab; I understand. Now, what kind of fun had you, girls?'

'Well, we spoke about Nep, and told her how much we all thought of him; she laughed at that and appeared pleased, as I expected she would.'

'Yes, yes,' said Hyacinthine, smiling. 'And what did you say next, Athena, you dear, witty, but wicked girl.'

'I brought the conversation round to you and described your resistless charms, and how infatuated he was with you.'

'Charming—charming. Go on. I suppose she was madly jealous.'

'I should just think she was, furiously jealous, although she tried to laugh it off,' shrieked Iduna, convulsed with giggles. 'Athena did rub the salt in with a vengeance. She did it so neatly, too, that the fright never knew that we were having sport with her.'

'Ah, that was a little cruel, wasn't it, you cunning girl; but what happened next?'

'Oh, I just asked her carelessly what hour Mr Lesslie generally got home at night after his classes, and she innocently answered, 'Never before eleven.'

'That was the most excruciating part of the farce,' cried Iduna. 'How I wish you had been there to see and hear it. Athena put her most reflective air on, and remarked casually,—

"Dear me, do you really say so, Mrs Lesslie. Well, I know he is good enough always to escort Mrs Hart-Beachcomber home after the class is over. I suppose he has told you all about that, though."

'The stupid fell into the trap, and said Nep had not mentioned the interesting fact. Then Athena said,—

"Strange—very strange. Now, let me see. The model classes are over by nine o'clock, and if we allow three-quarters of an hour for Mr Lesslie to see Mrs Hart-Beachcomber home and reach his own house, that would make it a quarter to ten, or ten o'clock at the utmost limit."

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'We rose and said good-bye after that Parthian shot,' said Athena. 'I hope, dear, you are not annoyed at me using your name for a little bit of fun. He has seen you home once or twice, you know.'

'Oh, I don't mind in the 'least,' answered Hyacinthine, good naturedly. 'Particularly since it is Nep; he is such a devoted hubby, and has always been so stupidly reserved with me when I wanted to be kind to him. I have a score to wipe off with him; besides, just fancy, he has declined giving me any more private lessons; says he has no leisure, but I am positive it is because he has fallen in love with me, and is afraid of his squaw getting jealous.'

'He knows he could have no chance with *you*, our peerless Juliet,' said the younger parasite. 'He is afraid of himself, that is why he dare not trust himself alone with you.'

'Perhaps so—indeed, I have noticed something of the kind. But, of course, as you say, dear Iduna, it would be presumption on his part. A little fun is all very well, but a lady like me must draw the line at common teachers. Now, I have an idea—a splendid idea to keep this little game up.'

'Oh, give us your idea, Juliet. It must be deliciously original if it comes from your fertile brain.'

'Suppose we concoct an anonymous love letter, something frantically fond and suggestively compromising. I'll compose the words, and Athena will write the epistle. We must make it as coming from some girl with whom Nep has been very intimate; interlace it with endearing expressions and fond remembrances of kisses, etc., which have passed between them quite recently; sign it with some fancy name, and address it to Mr Lesslie so that the Mr may be mistaken for Mrs. We can post it at once, so that it will arrive at his house while he is out. Isn't there the making of a comedy about this, girls?'

'Delightful. Oh, it is too utterly and deliciously funny. What a genius you are, to be sure, Juliet.'

'Just fancy the situation,' continued Hyacinthine, warming up to her conception under the fulsome praise of her worshipper.

'First, the woman, having put her brats to bed, sits down to wait for her husband's return, and brood on the little

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sting you have left in her, Athena. Rat-a-tat comes the postman's knock. She opens the door, gets a letter, sees it has her name on it, and opens it. He is false. She has been told of one love, here is another, with confirmation doubly strong. First act, tears and jealousy. Second act, the return of the unconscious Nep. Rackets all round. It would bring down any house. I must give the idea to Arty Borrymore, to make a serio-comedy out of. I could act the jealous wife to perfection.'

'You could, Juliet—you could, as no one else could,' shrieked the gushing Iduna, rapturously. 'Only it would have to be a lovely wife, which the original is not, by any means.'

'Of course I mean that to be my rôle. The suffering, deceived, tender-hearted and beautiful wife, who may forgive her husband in the third act, or go mad, or commit suicide, whichever is the most likely to take. Now, come, darling, and have a cup of tea, then to set to work with the manufacture of our bombshell.'

Over the tea-board, and with many bursts of admiration and happy laughter, the letter was composed, and afterwards written by Athena. Then Mr Artemus Borrymore, the theatrical agent, coming in, broke up the party, and the loving friends separated with hugs and kisses—the Misses Hurdles to post the letter, and Hyacinthine to make Mr Borrymore a blest man by giving him an advance cheque on their new venture.

Now that the cash was provided, the anxieties of the bold and hopeful Artemus were banished, 'the winter of his discontent made glorious summer, and all the clouds that lowered upon his home, in the deep bosom of the ocean buried.'

He stayed to dinner, and, unlike Lord Fabro, he drank freely both the wine and spirits of his fair hostess and future manageress. Afterwards they spent a merry evening together at the theatre, had supper at the Criterion, and drank again to the success of their dramatic company. Altogether, Mrs Hart-Beachcomber had spent a busy, enjoyable and profitable day, despite a few breezes, and went to bed fairly well content.

CHAPTER XII

DEATH AND LIFE

BEATRICE GRAY took up her burden so quietly that no one suspected the weight she was carrying. There are griefs which appeal to the senses, like the murmuring of shallow streams,—woes which shriek and rave, as gusty autumn blasts rant amongst forest branches,—wrongs heralded with deep thunder, and illuminated by forked lightning. But these are not the streams which drown, nor the tempests that overthrow, nor the flames that consume all that is best destroyed.

Many have learnt that death is not the primal curse of animated nature ; a few also come to know that sin and pain are blessings in disguise. When sorrow, shame and agony have taught this wisdom to the humbled spirit, then they must be recognised as instruments of good. God never tortures wantonly. He is the Creator, not the Destroyer. In this eternal economy there is no evil, but all is utilised for the production of good. And yet many of the mysteries around us seem to be malevolent. The poison kills, the tempest wrecks, and flowers are crushed and soiled.

When Arnold Kirklock left Beatrice, she felt as if her life had come to an end. She had been rudely bereft of all that a woman is rightly taught to prize. She was left to bear the load of her trouble alone, for now she could not share it with any one, as she had hitherto done with her trivial sorrows. This seemed a terrible burden to take up, yet her conscience approved of the step she had taken. It was better to be disgraced than to be mated with a traitor. Upon this point her whole womanhood felt assured, even although the resistless conviction was against all the ethics of tradition.

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There was never a betrayed woman but has shivered at the sacrifice she made for the sake of her reputation. When a man proves his friend to be a liar, a thief and a traitor, he casts the dastard from his regard, and the world applauds his stern repudiation. He is not reproached for what he may have lost through his blind confidence and trust, but condoled with and respected for his resolution to sacrifice no more.

Why should it be different with the woman when her affection has been tampered with, her trust betrayed, and her present life made bankrupt?

If the man can rise again from the ashes of his ruin, why cannot the woman? If it would be infamous on his part to link himself for life to the discovered thief, can the woman be justified in binding her future because she has lost her past?

True love cannot exist without respect, and without love marriage is infamy.

Beatrice had been plunged into an abyss of despair, but there was hope for her since her soul had revolted against her fate. It is only when the spirit accepts its defeat that hope perishes. There are no fetters strong enough to bind the soul that can resist. No jail fast enough to hold it when it would be free. No gulf deep enough to keep it down when it wishes to soar. No stain which cannot be washed from its pinions, for it is the undefilable breath of God.

Beatrice had yet to learn that the soul is a power apart from the body, and that only abject renunciation of liberty can contaminate this divine gift. A stain will become a rust if left on the brightest blade, yet may be the means of making the dull and uncared-for surface all the brighter if it draws attention to the neglect.

Beatrice had hitherto lived in ignorance rather than in innocence; in blindness rather than in security; within a limited sphere which would have been death in life had it continued.

If she had been permitted to marry her seducer she might have won respectability, but never trust nor true happiness. Her future must either have dwarfed and

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withered, or else become a hell of cureless woe—that worst of all hells on earth, a marriage of disillusion. Better to have liberty of action when disillusioned—liberty to walk alone and away from this valley of death—than to be chained for life among the skeletons of slain desires and aspirations. Better to have sinned once and repent than continue the soul-corroding sin, even although legitimised.

Yet it was hard to lose all that made life bright at one fell stroke; to be woke up so rudely from that long, happy slumber. Discipline is always hateful, and training a bitter necessity. For the first few days after she had driven her false lover from her, Beatrice was sustained by her passionate resentment and utter disgust. His image filled her mind, it is true, but with the loathing that one remembers the sight of a noisome object.

She felt no regret for her hasty decision. It was rather with a sensation of profound relief that she saw his packages removed—the relief one feels when unwelcome visitors have gone away.

She had gone through the rooms and taken from them everything that remained of him, destroying and obliterating every trace with a savage energy that seemed almost like a pleasure. Everything *round* her had been wiped out and cleared away of the personality of Arnold Kirklock. Had she also removed all other tokens? It seemed as if she had, for a little time.

Then a great blank descended upon her life; as if with the blots all the records of her past had been erased, a dull deadness and dreariness brooded upon the cottage and refused to be lifted. Nothing interested her, not even the fatal illness of her grandmother. She was desolate and apathetic.

Yet she did not wish him back. She was satisfied that she had found him out, and that he had gone away without a protest. When she thought of her past blindness and trust, she was contented that the one had been removed and the other destroyed. She felt stronger and more self-reliant for the loss. She had been a foolish child, and she was now a discriminating woman.

Had she ever loved him or even admired him? She

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recalled his features with critical indifference, and her own past emotions with icy and wondering contempt. No, she had not loved him. It had been all a horrible mistake—a dream from which she had woke with only a fading remembrance to disturb her.

She looked into her glass and saw the same face, with a sterner expression on the features. She looked into her heart, and found only vacancy there. The reflection of Arnold Kirklock, with his false raptures and words, had vanished, taking with them all her former ideals and foolish fancies.

She now devoted herself day and night to the wants of her dying grandmother. She had loved the old woman so utterly before, for they had been all in all to each other before that awaking. She now wondered where her tenderness and love had gone. A year ago—even three months since—the passing of that aged and only friend would have crushed her with grief. Now she could watch the rapid changes and contemplate the end with calmness; yet she knew that when the eyes closed she would be for the first time completely alone and friendless. She detested herself for her own lack of emotion, but she could not help it. Her heart was in a stupor, and her lips were sealed. But her grandmother suspected nothing of this. To her Beatrice was the same child—a little more reserved and gentler, much more considerate and devoted.

Beatrice hardly ever left the sickroom now, and had lost all desire for fresh air and exercise. She had the couch carried upstairs and into her grandmother's bedroom, and rested on it at nights, in spite of the invalid's remonstrances. Here she spent all her hours nursing and doing what she could to soften these last days.

There was no possible hope that Mrs Gray would ever see another spring. As she had anticipated every earthly concern, as far as frail humanity could, there was nothing more to be done except prepare for the next world.

Before she became too weak to talk, Mrs Gray had sometimes spoken about Arnold, and Beatrice answered her quietly and easily. The old lady had heard things from the servant, and felt a little disappointed at his departure. She wished that the intimacy had ripened to love.

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‘I hoped, dear, that you would have grown fond of each other, being so much together. I’d have died easier if that had been the case. Now it troubles me to leave you so young and without a friend.’

‘Don’t trouble yourself, granny, on my account. Without you my life will be like the cottage—empty; but I can take care of myself.’

‘I think he was fond of you, Beatrice. I hope you did not quarrel.’

‘Oh, no, we were always good friends. He was better, and had to attend to his own affairs. That was the sole reason of his going.’

‘But he has not written again.’

‘He may have done so and his letters gone astray. He is travelling abroad, you know, dearest.’

‘Ah! yes, that may be the reason. He may come back before I go.’

‘Don’t, granny,’ cried Beatrice, her eyes brimming. ‘You have me, and we need no strangers. Let me read a chapter to you.’

Autumn went slowly by, and the winter months came upon them. The winds blew fiercely along the coast, and flung the waves with thunderous din upon the ruddy cliffs. Then Christmas arrived, white and cold, and still the invalid lingered.

It was nearly the close of January before the Angel with the shears entered Ivydene Cottage. Two angels came on that early morning—an angel to take and an angel to give. Life and Death stole into the cottage together.

Beatrice and her grandmother were together on that still, dark morning. The doctor had left them late on the night before, and the servant was sleeping in the other room.

He had told Beatrice that the end was very near, for her grandmother had ceased to suffer. All the past day she had lain in a blessed freedom from pain, dozing most of the time.

Instead of going to her couch Beatrice sat up this night by the bedside. She had fallen asleep with her head on

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the edge of her grandmother's pillow, and her firm hand clasped by the transparent aged one.

She dreamt that she was walking along a meadow land, with her grandmother leading her, as she had done so often as a child. The grass was green and fresh, and before them spread a beautiful landscape, with limpid skies overhead ; but behind them was a dense curtain of dark, rainy mist.

How young and pretty her grandmother looked. Beatrice had a portrait of her like this, but she had never seen her in that condition. Her grey hair was golden brown, and her figure was shapely and soft in the white gown that she wore.

• The dark mist, however, was creeping after them rapidly.

Already its coldness was chilling the dreamer. They came to a brook, where she saw a fisher grilling fresh trout on some embers ; his rod and basket lay beside him.

A sudden hunger and desire for the fish seized Beatrice suddenly, then the fisher raised his head and she saw it was Arnold Kirklock. He approached smilingly and offered her one of the cooked trout, which she ravenously commenced to eat. She remembered in her dream how often she had dreamt before during the past six months about seeing and eating fish. It was only a repetition of many dreams.

But this time she had hardly taken a bit before she felt suddenly sick and faint. The cold mist by this time had closed over her, chilling her to the heart and hiding both her grandmother and her lover.

She staggered blindly forward, and fell downward through space. Where the brook had been now yawned a frightful chasm.

With a gasp of deadly fear she woke, to find the eyes of her grandmother fixed upon her with a strangely bright and penetrating expression. Her heart was fluttering like a trapped bird beating its wings, and a peculiar sensation of faintness gripped and paralysed her, which she had never experienced before.

She attempted to rise, but instead slipped down from the chair on to her knees, and for a moment buried her face in the coverlet. She was afraid and ashamed to look at these

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eyes, which appeared to have read her secret; also the strange quivering at her heart was so overpowering that Beatrice thought she was also dying.

‘Lord Jesus, I come!’

These words were uttered by her grandmother in a clear voice. They startled the girl and forced her to look up. The eyes which had pierced her a moment before were now fixed outwards with a passion of joy, while a radiant smile played upon the white lips, and a luminous glow spread over the face, transfiguring it into youth and beauty. A great blaze of light seemed to leap from the dying eyes at that instant, and shine vividly upon the glowing, rapturous face.

Then all became dark and still in that chamber. The aged woman had yielded up her spirit, and another soul had flapped its wings against the heart of Beatrice Gray, now bereft of her only earthly protector.

CHAPTER XIII

OUT OF EVIL GOOD HAD COME

BEATRICE was very ignorant in the mysteries of life, for that false reserve which is considered modesty amongst so many good women had sealed the lips of her grandmother. It is so impossible for many good women to instruct their children on matters much more important than household duties. This senseless and utterly false modesty has wrecked the health and happiness of countless victims. Tradition has imprinted on their minds that ignorance and innocence are identical; that knowledge is an evil fruit productive only of misery. It was the tasting of the tree of knowledge that banished Eve from Paradise, and only while she remained ignorant was she happy. Nature, however, has implanted in all creative life instincts which must have been exercised even before the forbidden tree was tampered with. And Nature came to the assistance of this benighted child, and soon taught her the meaning of that strange heart-fluttering. It was revealed to her, even before the light had faded from her grandmother's eyes, that she was about to become a mother.

For a time the horror of that sudden revelation rendered her oblivious to her present affliction, and she kneeled beside the newly dead, gazing blankly into those sightless eyes. What could she do, what could she do now that her shame could no longer be concealed? During that frightful pause the thought of suicide passed through her dazed mind like a demoniac whisper. Only for a moment, however, was that hellish guest entertained. She was not a coward, and therefore resolutely pushed that thought away at once and forever. It was life she had henceforth to

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think about, her own life and that other life which had just woke up. With a firm mouth she rose quietly and closed the dim eyes. Then she went out and called the servant.

Leaving her to attend to the dead, Beatrice ran through the dark to the doctor's house and roused him also. He promised to come at once.

Then she went back, thinking intently as she retraced her steps. She was alone now, and must act quickly before her condition was discovered; get away from this village, where she was so well known and respected, and hide herself amongst strangers until her baby was born. After that, fate must decide as to the future.

It seemed a horrible sacrilege to find cause for rejoicing in her grandmother's death, but on this chill winter morning she could not resist a feeling of relief.

Her grandmother knew all now, without being told by human lips. She was gone where no shame nor sorrow could touch her, and she understood everything. These reflections comforted and strengthened the afflicted girl in this first wretched hour. This conviction made her regard her loss with composure.

The clergyman and doctor, and all who had known her from childhood, were surprised at her fortitude during this trying time. She made the arrangements for the funeral quietly and methodically, and listened to their sympathy and condolence without breaking down. Yet she did not appear indifferent, for her cheeks were pale and her eyelids heavy with unshed tears and want of rest.

When the pastor, who was a kindly, homely man, invited her to stay with his family, she quietly but firmly refused. She received his words of comfort, however, gratefully, but without opening her mind. The good man thought this timidity on her part, and left her to come to him for advice when she felt ready.

On the day of the funeral she astonished her mother's lawyer by telling him that she intended selling the cottage, and that she was resolved to leave Deepwold. He, however, took her instructions, and promised to attend to the disposal of it.

She was heiress to all that her grandmother had pos-

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sessed. This, with the cottage, amounted to one hundred and thirty pounds per annum. It was sufficient to live comfortably upon in a small place like Deepwold, and even keep her modestly in a larger town. Beatrice therefore decided what she would do without speaking to anyone.

After the funeral was over, and the lawyer had departed, she set to work and packed all that she cared to keep. When this was done she addressed the luggage to London.

She had by this time made her plans. She would pass through the metropolis and find a shelter somewhere near to rest for the next few months, while she considered what was to be done afterwards. In London she could purchase a wedding-ring and widow's weeds, and then she would change her name.

While she was making these plans the question of Arnold and his responsibilities never occurred to her. She had driven him completely from her calculations.

She would be able to provide for her own infant when it came. If the disgrace was to be hers, so would this child; she would owe no benefit to this man, who had bestowed upon her only wrong and disaster.

It was fortunate for the resentful Beatrice that she possessed this sure, if small, income. It permitted her to carry out her independent plans, whereas otherwise she might have been forced to yield and fawn upon her betrayer. It placed her, to a certain extent, above pity.

The world lay before her to choose her temporary hiding-place. Beyond Salisbury she was not likely to meet anyone who knew her, yet she determined to get away from the Southern line of traffic. She had no experience of any other town except Exeter; but although she felt horribly nervous of facing the unknown, yet her resolution remained unaltered.

For days she pored over *Chambers's Gazetteer of the World*, which had been one of her school prizes, seeking for the healthiest places, and at last she decided to try Margate or Ramsgate. Both had the advantage of being totally unknown to her.

But when at last she was ready to go, she found it by no means easy to shake off her friends without explanation.

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The clergyman; the doctor, Sarah and her intimate neighbours were all filled with anxiety to know her intentions, and eager with good and earnest advice. To evade these well-wishers, Beatrice made up a story, and, for want of a better excuse, used the name of Mrs Hart-Beachcomber. She hated herself for having to tell the falsehoods, even although she did not expect they would ever be discovered. Up till lately, also, she had always been an open-hearted and truthful girl, but the sin she had committed necessitated other sins to cover it. No fault can stand without props. She was, however, involved, and must go on; there was no escape now, and no chance of turning back.

Yet it was with a heavy heart that Beatrice said farewell to all she had loved and been honoured by. Would she ever look upon those kindly faces again, would she ever return to those once happy scenes, over which a blight now lay?

The turf yet lay high and rugged on her grandmother's grave, and the tombstone, which she had ordered, was not yet ready to be placed; but she must go before it was raised or the flowers planted which had also been ordered. It would not be *her* hands that tended the snowdrops and watched them appear. She felt a cruel ingrate as she turned from that sacred spot.

The furniture in the cottage was to be sold. She had left directions for this. The chairs and tables which had been familiar friends to her since she could remember anything — they would now be scattered and handled by strangers. As she looked at them for the last time, they seemed to reproach her for this ruthless disturbance and abandoning. The blight had fallen on them as on her past, and Arnold Kirklock had been the cause.

But she had stern duties to endure, and a future to face which could not be evaded. Happiness and sentiment were things of the past; as for memories, they would follow her wherever she went.

Sarah nearly broke her heart when the parting came. She had been like a mother to the miserable exile, and would gladly have followed her. But she above all must never learn this disgraceful secret. Beatrice felt that she

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could not have survived the loss of that honest and simple woman's respect.

Therefore she must go alone out to the strange world, and for a time, if not for ever, disappear.

Sarah was a native of Deepwold, and had never been out of it. She was going to keep house for her brothers when her young mistress left, so that she could easily be found when wanted while she lived. Beatrice promised faithfully that she would write regularly to this humble friend.

At last she broke away from the home of her childhood, and, with her luggage in the van, began her journey.

It was early night when she reached London, and booking her heavy luggage at the station, she drove to a hotel which the doctor had recommended to her. After a light supper she went straight to bed.

Next day she made her purchases, and departed early in the afternoon for Ramsgate.

After another night in a hotel, where she entered her name as Mrs Gray—for she had put on a widow's bonnet and veil in the train—she rose and began her search for lodgings.

There were plenty of places to let in Ramsgate, as it was the dead season, and Beatrice soon found what she wanted, a good bedroom sitting-room in a quiet, respectable street near the promenade. The terms were reasonable, and the landlord and his wife lived alone, without children or other lodgers.

This landlady informed Beatrice that she had been an hospital nurse before her marriage, also that her husband was a teacher of languages. They were Roman Catholics, which the girl heard with relief, for she thought this would be just the place to find the seclusion she wanted. She closed therefore with the bargain, and sent for her luggage.

Beatrice told the landlady the story she had concocted, awkwardly and with many blushes, for she was unused to deception. But she need not have done so, as Mrs Bracer had no undue curiosity. With the month's rent in advance and the sight of the luggage, her mind was perfectly at rest. However, she did what she thought was expected from her; broke into extravagant expressions of sympathy

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and sorrow for the young widow's bereavement, and promised to act like a sister to her.

Mrs Bracer was a queer little withered creature, much older than her husband, and with jerky movements. She kept no servant, but did the work herself, with the assistance of her husband when he was at home. Her family consisted of a tiny Prince Charles spaniel, which she carried on one arm perpetually. Her husband was a modest, shy young man, who passed all his spare time working under the direction of his better half. The house was their hobby to keep it speckless, and on the little dog 'Peterkin' they lavished their affections.

Here Beatrice led a quiet life while she waited on the coming event. After a few days she became intimate enough with Mrs Bracer to tell her what was expected, and that lady was delighted.

'Providence must have directed you to Hermitage Villa, my dear Mrs Gray, for I shall be your nurse when the time comes, and see you safely over your trouble.'

Beatrice agreed with Mrs Bracer, for although the weekly bills were somewhat startling when compared with Devon prices, both landlord and landlady were most attentive. The air also was invigorating, and gave Beatrice an appetite such as she had not enjoyed for months before coming. Altogether, during this interval she was less unhappy than she had hoped to be.

She spent as much of her time outside as she could, drinking in the strong sea breezes, and she was with strangers who took her at her own word, and made her feel at home. Little Peterkin soon became attached to her, and was a most unobtrusive companion. On Sundays she went to Mass and benediction, as the Roman Church was near, and Mrs Bracer had introduced her. Being rather High Church at home, she had no prejudice against the services. The music was magnificent, and the decorations touched her artistic sympathies. Here also she felt her secret safe.

Four months passed peacefully while she employed her leisure with her needle. Then one balmy day, in the first month of summer, Beatrice received her gift. It was a

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daughter. When the young mother heard that small voice and felt the soft mite on her bosom, all her sorrow vanished as if by magic. Had she sinned and suffered remorse for that iniquity? She had no consciousness of evil-doing now, nor any regrets for the past. A thrilling joy pervaded her being, a blessed thankfulness for the boon which Heaven had granted her swelled her heart and forced happy words of prayer from her lips. She was no longer the shame-stricken Magdalene, but the woman made perfect. Nature was triumphant. Out of evil good had come, and she desired no more. Her cup of joy was brimming over.

CHAPTER XIV

BEATRICE BEGINS A NEW LIFE

BEATRICE insisted on nursing her baby, in spite of Mrs Bracer's wise remonstrances that it would utterly spoil her figure.

'Bother my figure; do you think I am going to starve baby for such a foolish and selfish motive as that? I am strong enough to nurse triplets, and it cannot hurt either the figure or the health. God made us for this duty.'

'Yes,' answered Mrs Bracer, briskly. 'And God also made many creatures to kill and eat each other, and many a pretty flower to wither and die. There are two sorts of live things in this world, and these are victims and victimisers. Do you want to be one of the victims?'

'Yes, with all my heart, if this little blue-eyed darling is to be the victimiser,' cried Beatrice, swooping upon her infant and cuddling it to her breast. Once there the tiny maid soon showed what her intentions were, and which side she inclined towards in the mooted question.

Mrs Bracer shrugged her withered shoulders when she saw how the point had been settled; her profits with the dairy and grocer, as far as this new lodger was concerned, were gone. Baby had joined the same ranks as Mrs Bracer, and intended also to victimise her fond parent and spare the cow, and not encourage the much advertised foods of Mellin and Benger.

But the figure of Beatrice was not of the spoiling kind. She was now eighteen, strong, and with magnificent health, and every day added to her splendid vitality. Since her baby had come to fill her thoughts, she had no other care. Her own diet and exercise were regulated to suit the com-

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fort of the small tyrant, and in her devotion all gloomy reflections were pushed aside.

Beatrice had never thought seriously about religious matters. Her own church at Deepwold was neither very impressive nor engrossing. It had been a matter of custom for all who wished to be regarded as respectable to attend the service regularly on Sunday, while those who had plenty of leisure also went on feast days.

But the congregation considered it likewise a sign of respectability to take spiritual affairs composedly and soberly. The six days were made for work and play to the people; the seventh day was given over to the direction of the parson. He was master of the ceremonies then, and they submitted to his time-established authority and management of their conscience. There were ranters in the village, of course, Salvationists, Baptists, Christian Brethren and Methodists in all their varied shades and degrees of difference, but these ignorant bigots were not considered seriously as Christians by the church-goers. They were classed with the disreputable free-thinkers, socialists and poachers. There were no zealots in the congregation to which Beatrice belonged.

The lord of the manor was a Roman Catholic, and kept his own private chapel and priest, who lived on terms of friendship with the Rector. This gentleman, as we have said, had very strong leanings towards Ritualism, so that Beatrice saw little difference in the church she now attended to the one she had been accustomed to at home. Just enough to make it seem more complete, but nothing to startle her passive ideas.

It did not therefore appear to make much difference to Beatrice when her landlady proposed to have the baby baptized by the priest, and offered, with her husband, to stand as sponsors. The offer was a most kind one, and smoothed away many difficulties for the mother. She wished to have her child christened, but she did not care to go to a clergyman of her own church, as that would involve explanations which she shrank from.

So it was arranged, and one day the infant was taken to the Roman Church by Mr and Mrs Bracer, while Beatrice

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remained at home. As baby was born in the month of May, she was called Mary, and dedicated to the Virgin Mother of Jesus. This was such an intense relief to Beatrice that she could not help thinking upon the differences between her own Church and this more ancient form of worship. The comparison made her even more lenient towards Rome than she had been before.

Had she gone to an English clergyman, there would have been questions asked and difficulties raised, which she had now escaped. Her child had been accepted for her own soul's sake, and without any demur. Rome was delighted to have snatched a brand from the burning, and Mrs Bracer felt that this good deed of hers had bestowed upon her a special grace, and wiped off a big score of small peculations.

Not that these arithmetical errors in the weekly accounts between her and her unsophisticated lodger troubled her conscience greatly. The consciences of seaside landladies are not assertive about such trivial lapses from strict probity; still, that morning's work made Mrs Bracer more at peace with herself, while it also gave her a new interest in the baby and its young mother.

She felt now a relative, with the right of a relation to help herself. She no longer hesitated about the adding of a halfpenny or a penny to the tea, sugar or butter. It seemed now only legitimate profit to add the penny, where possible, and discard the lesser sum. To make her own tea also and sweeten it from the store of her god-daughter's mother appeared no longer a thing to be ashamed of. It was all in the family. It is very soothing to be able to help oneself freely when inclined without the uncomfortable sensation of doing a mean action.

And Beatrice did not mind though her provisions vanished so rapidly, neither did she grumble at the high price of articles in Ramsgate. Sometimes she would have liked her butter and fish better if they had been fresher, and the chops less scraggy, or the steak more tender. But she only looked at the sum total of her bills, and was satisfied that she could pay them out of her income. Perhaps it was the difference between the waters of Ramsgate and Devon that made the tea and sugar go quicker. Mrs Bracer told

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her that the varieties of water made all the difference in the waste or saving of tea and sugar, and she believed Mrs Bracer, who must know, since she had been a hospital nurse. Hospital nurses learn a lot more than other people, and Mrs Bracer had proved her superior knowledge at the time of the birth of Mary.

• Beatrice was now quite at home in Hermitage Villa, which had proved such a hermitage to her. With her baby, growing every day more lovely, she felt content and happy. Mary was a fair child, and promised to be a facsimile of her mother. During the months Beatrice was nursing her, every hour was occupied, and the present was enough to fill her thoughts.

Swiftly the months passed, and another summer was opening before the weaning was decided; then Beatrice began to think upon the future.

She was now nineteen, and felt that she must do something to provide for the growing up of this charge. The income which had been enough for her grandmother and her in Devon was barely sufficient to keep them in Rams-gate. She must soon make a move, she felt, to increase it.

She spoke to Mrs Bracer about this and asked her advice, and once more that practical woman came to her aid.

‘Have you ever considered the stage, Mrs Gray? I am positive that you have the makings of a successful actress in you.’

Beatrice had not thought of this mode of making a living, yet it had much to recommend it. She had only twice in her life been inside a theatre, yet at school she had taken parts in plays, and had been highly extolled for her recitations and readings. When Mrs Bracer made the suggestion, Beatrice thought she would enjoy such a life; also, as her landlady pointed out, it was the only occupation where she would be able to keep her child with her.

This, with the thought of her own condition, decided her. Yes, she would become an actress. She would be able to keep herself and Mary while she was studying the profession. The money from the sale of her property was at present lying in the bank. It would do to pay what fees might be asked, and her necessary stage dresses.

Mrs Bracer then told her about the genial and motherly

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Margate trainer and manageress, Miss Martha Playfair. If Beatrice went to her she would get honest advice, and all the help she required. Mary was now so far independent of her mother that she could be left with safety with her godmother, therefore one day Beatrice wrote to Miss Playfair asking for an appointment. The reply was prompt and encouraging.

After a long interview she was accepted as a pupil, and after a few lessons entrusted with a small part. This she succeeded in so satisfactorily that the kind-hearted lady, who has discovered and trained so many of our best actresses, engaged her on her regular staff.

Chance, or Providence, had led Beatrice Gray to the best and most select school she could possibly have found in England. The companions she met here were all ladies, and Miss Playfair guarded them with the strictness and solicitude of a mother; they were not only properly trained, but as carefully protected as if they had been at a private seminary. She was both fortunate and lucky in this start on her perilous career, although at this time she was not aware of her good fortune. It is at the beginning of her professional life that the future of an actress depends.

It was all made so easy and comfortable for her that Beatrice wondered how people could malign the stage as immoral. The actors she played with were kindly and modest gentlemen, and the actresses ladies. One impulse seemed to move them all—the desire to succeed. While she remained at Margate she neither saw nor heard anything to make her regret the step she had taken, and so she went on earnestly and hopefully.

She still lived with Mrs Bracer and went to and fro by train, or on her bicycle when the weather was fine. She had now completely buried her past. But she had also entered the Church where her baby had been baptized. This last step was comparatively easy for her to take, and she had taken it without any enthusiasm or conviction. Yet her reasons seemed to her justifiable enough. She had begun by reading books and asking questions from her landlady. The baptism of her child had opened the way to her own conversion. She was now looking more seriously on life

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than she had done before. Rome seemed to offer her much more than her own Church did, and when she learnt what a grave act she had consented to without thinking, she was startled, for she felt separated from her baby. Then a wild yearning came upon her to be reunited. But what enthralled her most, and fired her fancy at this time, was the meaning which the Church takes of baptism. It was no symbolism or meaningless ceremony, but the complete blotting out of sin, the perfect regeneration of the soul and body.

She had already divorced her child's father, but hitherto she had felt herself to be contaminated, even although her baby was a sinless gift from God. Now this Church assured her and promised her that by entering the shelter of its fold she would not only be united eternally with her infant, but that her lost estate would be restored to her. She would be made completely free from all her past, and purified. What other Church could offer to her so precious a boon? It asked so little also from her—not even entire faith if she could not give it, only submission. She had but to accept this miracle and it would be accomplished without any mental or physical effort on her part—accept it as one of the other mysteries, many of which she had already been trained to accept as fathomless gifts from God.

She spoke to the priest and confided to him all her perplexities and doubts. He deplored her want of faith, yet told her that this was no barrier to her receiving the gracious benefits conferred by baptism. When the act was consummated she would become spotless from all past sins. As she listened, the desire to grasp this advantage became overpowering. She could not believe it possible, yet why should she refuse this real or fancied grace? She resolved to accept it, and pray, as the priest advised her, for faith. It was verily a God-like gift if true. After a week or two of uncertainty she went through the ceremony, and rose with a thrilling sensation that at last she was liberated from all bonds except those that held her to her child. She was now divorced by Heaven, and her wounds healed. Henceforth she would be a fresh woman. She was as before her fall—free and clean to begin her new life. Heaven, through Rome, had given all this to her. She felt truly blessed.

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She had left the church in a condition of beatitude, and turned along by the promenade. It was a lovely day, but yet too early in the season for the usual crowd of summer visitors. A number of strangers, however, sat on the seats or walked overlooking the sea.

Beatrice went over to the rail which guarded the cliffs, and gazed on the sunlit ocean. The world seemed changed since she had entered that holy shelter. She was able to think now upon her grandmother without reproach. Yes, surely it must be true, for her soul felt singularly uplifted, and as if she were once again the Beatrice which that grandmother had loved, a girl who prized the honour once again bestowed upon her to guard with her life. She raised her eyes, filled with blessed tears of joy, to the sky, and murmured a prayer of gratitude.

All at once a woman's falsely-pitched voice struck upon her ears, and in an instant shattered her repose. Glancing swiftly in the direction of the voice, Beatrice dropped her veil and clutched at the railing.

Mrs Hart-Beachcomber was approaching, leaning on the arm of Arnold Kirklock.

CHAPTER XV

PORTRAIT OF MRS HYACINTHINE HART-BEACHCOMBER BY HERSELF

THE estimation which Mrs Hart-Beachcomber had of herself differed entirely from what our readers may probably have gathered of her character from the author's bald description of her actions. Having looked at her so far from the exterior, let us now endeavour to get an internal glimpse of her. To do this satisfactorily there is only one method, and that is to use *her* mental eyes, and judge her as she criticised herself. Some natures may be analysed by more independent methods. We may picture up the remorse of a conscience-haunted murderer, or a person who by his own folly has brought ruin and disaster upon his life. We are able to do this by the simple trick of placing ourselves in a similar position and giving our imagination full rope. But there is no human standard to judge the murderer by who is able to forget his crime, who is totally unconscious of having committed a crime, and who considers himself an example of all the virtues. Only a member of the lower animal, that is, the soulless world, could comprehend this state of unmorality.

When such a character is encountered it is best to record their actions and idiosyncrasies without comment. Take the person's own estimate of what he considers himself to be, since we cannot find any other consciousness to work from, and trace, as far as possible, the results of his personality on surrounding objects. Thus let us continue our study of Mrs Hart-Beachcomber.

Her mirror, when she consulted it, told her, what her sycophants did, that she was surpassingly beautiful, and as nearly perfect as any living woman could possibly be.

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Perhaps her nose might have been improved, yet even on this point she had grave doubts. A more classic nose possibly would not have so exactly suited her face; she had looked at it so long that, on the whole, she was perfectly satisfied with its shape—it seemed to give the variety that was required.

Her form was matchless; several artists and doctors had said so to her when she consulted them, and they were good and experienced judges of the form divine. She adored her loveliness with a reverence and fervour that seemed religious gratitude on her part to the Creator who had so richly endowed her with such matchless graces. She felt it to be a sacred duty to guard, adorn and exhibit this precious birthright to the utmost advantage.

She watched other women with a keen and critical scrutiny, and rapidly discovered their imperfections. It was only when they tried to hide these imperfections that she grew indignant. Hypocrisy and deceit, *in others*, were hateful to her, and she considered it her duty to expose the frauds. She never hesitated to do her duty in this respect, regardless of public or private opinion. When the eyes of any foolishly blinded man needed opening, she dauntlessly did her best to make him see, as she did, what a faulty object he was infatuated with. She did not mind in the least how much she wounded or insulted the object of her indignation. The more publicly it was done, the greater satisfaction her duty imparted to her. She enjoyed sensations where she was the heroine, and when she had discomfited her rival she felt serenely happy and satisfied that the witnesses must admire her candour and bravery.

She never compared herself with a contemporary, yet when former beauties were spoken about she was wont to say that Helen of Troy and Mary of Scotland must have been of her type. Indeed, she had a conviction that there was something in the idea of reincarnation, for a strange feeling impressed her that she was the reincarnation of one of these celebrities.

‘I feel it strongest when I am melancholy,’ she would say to her intimates, sorrowfully. ‘Thus I seem almost to remember my giddy days in France, my troublous times in Scotland, and that last sad scene in Fotheringay Castle.

PORTRAIT OF MRS BEACHCOMBER

Ah ! my fate too closely resembles that of the Royal Stuart for it to be only a coincidence. I am Mary Stuart and no one else, and the presentiment of a similar end is constantly before me !'

She felt that royal blood coursed through her veins, and that the block would be her end. How it was to be managed was not yet so clear, however, as the certainty. When she was in this prophetic mood, her worshippers, Delphine and the two goddesses, Iduna and Athena, wept, and insisted on her drawing a small bottle of dry Monopole.

Although her parents were still alive, and her sire followed the somewhat humble pursuit of a field labourer, this did not take from her innate conviction. Queen Mary might easily be reincarnated in a hovel as well as in a palace. Such changes of fortune were all chances. The royal inheritance was hers, despite this accident.

Her memory also for disagreeable and private incidents was singularly convenient and short. What she desired to forget was blanked out completely.

If her husband were only out of her way she would have elevated him to a lofty position in a very brief space of time. She had not visited nor communicated with her parents for many years, so it was not astonishing that when she spoke about them they had been people of quality and wealth. Of course, they had gone to a better land, for she had vaulted them long since. The family sepulchre hid them effectually, with the date of her birth. She had been fifteen when they passed away ; that was nine years previously. For the past decade she had owned to being twenty-four, but often now, when she consulted her mirror and listened to the praises of her friends, she was doubtful if she was even so old as that. Like her fixed impression of being Mary Queen of Scots, she seriously had the conviction that she had foolishly advanced her age.

'Girls in their teens have such an ambition to be thought women that I must have jumped a few years at that time and forgotten it. I can remember how old-fashioned I was at ten, and how insulted I felt when people guessed my age correctly. I was always an ambitious little puss.'

When she meditated alone and considered her own char-

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acter, her contentment was supreme. How charitable she was! She was always trying to help ungrateful people. There was Delphine, for instance. The servant she had before Delphine was another example of her goodness wasted. This graceless girl she had taken from a workhouse and pampered up, as she did everyone. How had she turned out? Ah, when Hyacinthine thought of that wicked, ungrateful minx, her blood boiled, yet for all that she could congratulate herself that she had done her duty and returned good for evil.

This girl had actually fallen in love with the butcher boy, who was in his first year's apprenticeship, and earning half-a-crown per week. Hyacinthine had soon discovered this intrigue, and, with her sage experience, guessed the worst. How splendidly and uprightly she had acted on this occasion. When she recalled that she felt uplifted and holy. She had severely lectured the maid on her impropriety, which she took for granted, in spite of the lying denials of the frightened convict, and given her just one day to decide whether she would marry the boy or go back to the workhouse. She had softened her ultimatum by offering to pay all expenses of the wedding, and she won her virtuous point. The boy and girl were joined in holy wedlock. Not many mistresses would have gone to this trouble and expense in the cause of social purity for a workhouse brat and a butcher boy. But they proved ingrates, and, what was worse, the parents of the youthful bridegroom abused her so viciously that she was forced to dismiss the bride from her service, and wash her hands of the affair. Of course, she could not be expected to keep the pair as well as marry them. The result of that kind deed had been that the boy ran off to sea, the girl had returned to the workhouse, and the brutal guardians had publicly censured their benefactress for what they termed her uncalled-for interference with Providence.

Hyacinthine was always doing good; always bestowing her charity and patronage on unworthy objects, and never getting any other reward than the approval of her own satisfied conscience and, as in this instance, like Delphine's, the countenance of the pious and respectable old ladies, who also extolled her virtues.

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It was an important part of the religion of this remarkable woman to retain the good opinion of these highly respected and influential sherry-drinking old ladies. Sometimes, in her archness, she called them 'Tabbies' and 'Hens' to her intimates. Yet she was not contemptuous when she alluded to them as domesticated cats and barnyard fowls. She really felt quite at home and happy when in their company, and she liked to meet and walk with them in the streets and have them to her five-o'clock teas. They were like dear old furry cats when they purred delightedly over her private recitals from Longfellow, Whittier and Ridley, and extolled her good taste and rare accomplishments. They also resembled clucking hens in the shelter which their respectable wings bestowed upon her. She enjoyed their tattle and these comfortable luncheons, teas and suppers where the sherry, port and spirits were like themselves—so exceptionally matured and good. The odour of wealth and respectability which pervaded these convent-like mansions also suited her exactly, for these were important factors in her own creed. It was soothing to breathe this atmosphere of orthodox piety, scandal, parochial charity, good living and influence. It gave her tone and local standing, and likewise great liberty of private action. In spite of her extreme youth and exuberance of spirit, Hyacinthine had all the instincts and predilections of a tabby cat in herself.

Of course, as these elderly friends and admirers of hers were all orthodox church-going people, who had a rigid prejudice against Roman Catholicism and dissenters, she was too sensible a woman to blazon the fact of her recent perversion in that circle. In her estimation, bigots and martyrs were rude and unmannerly fools who brayed out their private opinions regardless of other people's susceptibilities. A well-bred person has no more call to advertise her private notions of faith than she has to tell how often she changes her underclothing. When Hyacinthine went to Mass or confession, which was not too frequently, she went to Farm Street, as other fashionable Catholics did, and kept that fact religiously to herself. Her confessions also were quickly got over, for when she reviewed her con-

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duct she found so much that was praiseworthy, and so little to accuse herself of, that the polite Father felt almost conscience-stricken to lay upon her any penance at all. It was like asking a saint to do penance.

Yet although almost superfluous in her case, Hyacinthine liked to go to her duties occasionally. They imparted such a sweet sense of virtuous superiority to her heart, and satisfied that strange and romantic yearning for the faith for which, in her former existence, she had lost her head.

Not being a bigot, but magnanimous in her disposition, she had forgiven the offending English clergyman, and still continued to keep up and occupy her pew in his church. The large crucifix in her bedroom was sacred to her private devotions. The local clergyman visited her in her drawing-room, where only art objects met his eye. Her pet priest never visited Heloise Villa, for the simple reason that she took care not to give him either name or address. Thus she moved serenely on her holy courses, and made religion a comfort instead of being a disturbance.

Her sense of propriety and morality were also fastidiously severe, without being vulgarly puritanical. She could stand a certain liberty of speech, and indulge in a witty story; indeed, when in her merry moods, she indulged pretty freely in both. But then *she* knew what to say and tell, and the exact limit where to stop. If anyone passed those limits she instantly flamed out upon them in her virtuous indignation. She felt herself to have such a keen and delicate perception of what was right and proper that she constituted herself as an infallible judge in such matters of license. When she had told a merry story she naturally expected her hearers to laugh at the point, and became exceedingly offended if they did not. They must laugh or she would quarrel. She thought them too dense for patience if they remained silent; then she would repeat her joke with angry emphasis and detailed explanations, until they were forced to admit that they saw it.

Most of her delicate tales were thus spoilt by the stupidity of her audience. She was so keen-witted herself that dolts always raised her ire, and most of her friends appeared to be sad fools.

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Feeling that she had this great responsibility as moral censor upon her, when she heard a joke she instantly became grave and watchful ; not to catch the point, but to discover the indelicacy and correct the narrator. Then as soon as she grasped, or thought she had grasped, the objectionable tone, she at once interrupted and stopped it

‘I don’t like that, dear,’ she would say with tender severity. ‘It is not a proper story. It is quite unfit for ears refined. You ought to have more discretion. I trust you do not repeat it to many people. You really ought to think more upon your character.’

Or if the point had been reached without an opportunity for rebuff, she would look wonderingly at the teller and say sweetly,—

‘Well, why do you pause—go on, what next? So far I can see nothing amusing. Perhaps you have forgotten the story. Is that so, dear?’

In this charming and polite fashion she managed to keep her stupid friends in order, and bridled all unseemly ribaldry.

She was very proud, as we have already seen ; proud of her lofty origin and her perfect breeding ; proud of her purity and innate innocence ; proud of her keen discrimination of good and evil. She had reason to be so, for she was able to sniff out an impropriety under any disguise ; no one could deceive her by their pretended simplicity or feigned artlessness. She only required to see a mutual glance or a lingering hand-squeeze furtively bestowed to solve the whole problem of intrigue and wickedness. Royal personages have always been noted for their eagle glances and preternatural perception.

As for those meaning glances which were sometimes passed between her guests when she was speaking, Hyacinthine was able to detect these instantly and understand what they meant. She never failed at such detection to stop her discourse and read the delinquents a scathing lecture on deceit, insincerity and vulgarity—vices which she abhorred, as all true and honest natures must. Her friends and admirers had to be very careful how they used their eyes and tongues when in her company. She made her sovereignty palpably felt.

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With regard to her own slight weaknesses and lapses from the standard of correctness, which she so rigorously set up for others, she might have excused herself, if excuse had been required in her case, by taking refuge in heredity and the rights which royalty abrogates in regard to the morality of those above and beneath the laws; but she required none of these palliatives. Her memory absolved her completely. They were wiped from her mental tablets as thoroughly as are the peccadilloes of a cat. Nothing could contaminate *her*. She was pure, true, gentle, generous and innocent as she was beautiful. True, she admitted that she was light-hearted and liked admiration; this was only natural in one possessing such resistless fascinations and wondrous talents. When she looked at herself, or listened to her own voice in conversation, song or declamation, she could not wonder that men loved her to distraction and women grew sick with envy. If she had dignity, she was also kind and generous. Why should she waste her sweetness on the desert air because men were foolish and women unkind?

She considered her voice the most flexible and perfect vocal instrument that had ever been bestowed upon woman. When she raised it in song it seemed to her as if angels were filling space with heavenly and touching melody. When she recited she felt as if the poet was being interpreted for the first time—that Shakespeare and George R. Sims were her debtors, and must feel grateful to her. She, however, preferred Sims to Shakespeare. She considered this modern master much more delicate in his choice of language, more pathetic in his subjects, and easier in his rhymes.

Her playing was not quite all she would have wished it to be. Still, she had learnt to vamp, and that was enough for a lady. There was always someone able to accompany her when she wished to enchant an audience.

She had a strong and rich vein of humour, which served to lighten her otherwise tragic life. If sometimes it carried her away a little, as in the case of that mirthful letter to the unknown wife of her painting-master, who could blame her for indulging in innocent fun? It only proved that her

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heart was in the right place, and that her natural archness and gaiety still remained in spite of her heavy sorrows.

‘The blood of beauty, wealth and power, the heart-blood of a queen,
The noblest of the Stuart race, the fairest earth hath seen,’

must have a little relaxation now and then, a little abnegation from dignity and state, as often it had when it pulsed in the veins of the Royal Mary. She could not always be chiding others for their misdemeanours. With all her virtues and perfections she was a woman, and only human.

This was the character and appearance of Hyacinthine as drawn by herself. Now let us get on to some of the results of her amiability and Puck-like, yet harmless, love of mischief.

CHAPTER XVI

HYACINTHINE DRESSES TO CONQUER

UNLESS the sender of an anonymous letter is specially gifted with imagination, it loses much of its point if she remains ignorant of its reception. I speak of the sender as feminine, because men—that is, Englishmen—never indulge in this continental form of amusement. Women, alas! sometimes do send such missives. But before they can drop to this depth of depravity they have ceased to be ladies, and are only fit to be the associates of those blackmailing refugees who have made their own countries too hot for them.

Hyacinthine Hart-Beachcomber was gifted with a considerable amount of imagination, and for one whole day found amusement enough in picturing the effect of her letter. During the afternoon her fellow-conspirators again visited her and helped her imagination in its exercise. Together they gloated, like the three witches in 'Macbeth,' on the 'toil and trouble' which they had brewed and despatched to this unoffending household.

But their happiness was not complete with these vivid fancies. Unless they knew that the letter had reached the right hands they might be building on doubtful premises. Neptune may easily have got it and thus spoilt their little game.

'I shall call upon Mrs Lesslie to-morrow,' said Athena, resolutely. 'I can easily turn the fool outside in with adroit questions.'

'Good, and Iduna and I shall manage Nep,' answered Hyacinthine. 'I have not seen him since he was rude enough to send back my quarter's fee, so that it is only to

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be expected that I should remonstrate against his leaving me in the lurch like this. Iduna can put some of her *enfant terrible* questions and draw the whole secret from him. He is not particularly smart at parrying. I shall also be there to aid her in my own quiet way.'

'If you join forces with me, Juliet, we are sure to succeed,' cried Iduna, with a gasp of fervent enthusiasm. Hyacinthine turned to her with her sweetest smile.

'I shall not fail you, darling,' she said calmly, with the air of one whose word is pledged to a heroic cause. Iduna clasped her hand thankfully and looked at Hyacinthine with mute adoration.

'I shall call for you to-morrow at three, and then we shall beard the lion in his den.'

The following day Hyacinthine spent the forenoon discussing dramatic business with her agent, Mr Artemus Borrymore. The matter at issue between them at present was where the first performance should take place. Hyacinthine wanted to make her *début* in London, with herself as sole performer, in an entertainment of dramatic recital. She was confident that she would make a hit unsupported. Mr Borrymore, having some considerable experience of theatrical matters, did not feel so cock-sure about this result. He had tested her histrionic abilities privately, hence his diffidence and doubts.

But she was in possession of the sinews of war, while he had experienced a continued spell of bad luck lately, so that he was not in the position to express his views openly. Her advance cheque had removed the bailiff's man from his premises; but numerous other writs were hovering over his head, with Holloway Gaol unpleasantly looming up in his mind's eye, therefore he had to walk cautiously.

His prudent advice had been to eschew the metropolis for the present, form a travelling company and go on tour. Country audiences are less critical, and local newspapers are easy to control. With a company of his own selecting he thought it was possible to drag his financier over the small towns of England and Scotland without getting mobbed and maltreated with high eggs and stale vegetables. But he shivered with prophetic horror at the idea of London.

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The country tour promised a long escape from creditors and summonses, with a pleasant change of air and a lovely time of roystering suppers and freedom from all care as long as the money lasted. London threatened a speedy and ignominious conclusion to his engagement.

Still, on the whole, seeing that the purse-holder was resolved upon this desperate venture, he considered that one dramatic recital all by herself would be less disastrous, and not so deadly a loss as the engaging of a company and the hiring of a theatre. He would pack the house as much as possible with paper, forget to send invitations to the leading critics, and do his utmost with free drinks to keep the audience in a placid temper. Having considered all the risks carefully, Mr Borrymore came to the conclusion to let his employer have her own way so far, therefore he yielded with as good a grace as he could.

'Very well, my dear Hyacinthine,' he said, after he had exhausted his reason against the project (theatrical agents always speak to their manageresses in affectionate and familiar terms), 'we will secure one of the rooms in St James's Hall and give a fashionable matinee. Matinees are the best for one-horse shows like this, as it keeps the great unwashed away, and secures us the best people. But only one performance before we go on tour. Remember, if you desire popularity you must not begin by making yourself cheap. Keep yourself select, my dear, and you will be run after.'

'Just so,' replied Hyacinthine, proudly. 'I mean always to keep myself select.'

'That is right. Now I shall set to work; secure the hall and see to the programme, bills and advertisements. When can you let me have a list of your pieces?'

'At once. I have already written down a number of selections and pieces which I have studied and excel in. I shall get it for you.'

Hyacinthine left the room to get her programme, and while she was absent Artemus took from his pocket a form of agreement which he had drawn up. He opened this and examined it carefully.

'Hum, let me see! Three years' engagement at fifty

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pounds per week, and expensés. Yes, she can stand that, I daresay, and it will pull me round; but, good Lord! we must have no more than one public Hart-Beachcomber performance or I'll lose my reputation. As soon as this agreement is signed I'll engage a reliable company and vamoose from this warm village. Her dresses, etc., will go a long way to keep the yokels from listening to her, but, by Jove! she is a stick and no mistake. Even the best support will have a hot time of it with her as lead.'

Hyacinthine entered at this moment with a sheet of note-paper in her hand.

'I have been thinking, Artémus, of reciting my pieces in costume. How does that strike you as a novelty?'

'Not for a matinee, my dear child,' said Artemus, hastily. 'It is impossible. The changes would occupy too much time; besides, it would not be correct for a recital.'

'Well, perhaps you are right. It would take time to change my dresses. But I must have accessories. A dagger, with some skulls and a bottle of poison, for the vault scene in "Juliet," you know. I could never do justice to myself without accessories.'

Artemus smothered a groan, then he replied suavely,—

'Oh, very well, you may have accessories, and provide the dagger, skulls and sleeping-draught if you like. Now, let us see what you propose to do.'

'First, I shall open with "Juliet," wearing a dress of the period; this will carry me through the rest of the first part without changing. Black velvet, you know, which will also serve for "Mary Queen of Scots."'

'Very good. You will look delightful in black velvet, with diamonds, etc. "Juliet," "The Life Boat," "Betsy and I," "Curfew," "The Raven" and "Mary Queen of Scots." That ought to show them what you can do, I guess.'

'During the interval I shall dress myself as Lady Teazle, and open with the screen scene in "The School for Scandal." Or what do you say for me beginning as Cleopatra? I have planned out a ravishing costume for the character of Egypt's queen—transparent silk gauze, and all that kind of thing.'

'I fancy Lady Teazle would be the most suitable rig-out

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for the pieces that follow. You see it might not quite do for "Faithless Sally Brown" and "Barny Maguire's Account of the Coronation" which you have put down amongst the other recitations. Silk gauze and ancient drapery don't fit in somehow with the Hibernian brogue. Stick to Lady Teazle. She adapts herself to any period, ancient or modern.'

'Very well. I shall take your advice.'

'Now, my dear, to proceed to more prosaic business. I have drawn up an agreement so that you may secure my services for three years. Let us have this signed, and then I shall be able to act in your name and get everything into working order without delay.'

Hyacinthine took the agreement from his hand and read it through carefully with a puckered brow. As a rule she was an astute business woman when vanity did not blind her, and she liked cheap bargains.

Mr Artemus Borrymore had a fair reputation as a theatrical agent—at least he had before several exposures of shady actions had spoilt it somewhat. In the profession he was now looked upon shyly as a notorious bad paymaster and shuffler, who had wrecked numerous companies. But Hyacinthine was ignorant of all these professional secrets. She had seen his name prominently in the market, and had been introduced to him by her stockbroking friend as a first-class man.

Fifty pounds per week seemed a large salary, even for exclusive service. Still, with him at her beck and call, and her own extraordinary genius to coin money, it was not too much to pay. After a few moments' consideration she consented, and calling Delphine in as witness, she signed the paper and handed it to him with a patronising smile.

'That is all right. I shall post you a duplicate with my signature in the course of the day. Now, my dear, just give me a little cheque for preliminary expenses—the hall rent, printers' bills and a few other necessary etcæteras.'

'How much money shall you require, Borrymore?'

'The matinee will cost you between four and five hundred. Of a course I shall send you all receipts, Hyacinthine.'

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With a deep sigh she drew a cheque for five hundred pounds and gave it to him reluctantly. It always wrung her heart to write out cheques.

‘You will be as careful of this as you can, Artemus.’

‘Depend upon me, darling. I shall use it as if it was my own, and I never fling away a copper if I can help it.’

He rose airily, and, helping himself to a glass of brandy and soda, took his departure. He was a long-visaged, sallow man, whose face was completely under control, but he looked decidedly less discontented with fate as he left Villa Heloise.

After he had gone, Hyacinthine sat, pen in hand, gazing at her cheque-book unhappily. Then a sudden thought crossed her mind and she went to her desk.

Taking a perfumed sheet of paper, with the crest of the Hart-Beachcombers on it—a bleeding heart pierced with a golden harpoon, surmounted with a ducal cap, and bearing the motto, *à outrance*—she hurriedly wrote, in a sprawly, large, uneven and back hand, the following note:—

‘DEAREST ARNOLD,—You have not been to see me lately, and I am in such trouble. I want your advice. Do come to dinner to-night, and take me to the theatre.—Yours ever affectionately,

HYACINTHINE.’

‘If he receives this in time I think I shall manage to get my matinee expenses back again,’ she murmured, as she sealed and directed the envelope. ‘Now to prepare for Iduna and the recreant Neptune.’

She sat down to a dainty lunch, and afterwards went upstairs to dress.

It was her most elaborate and imposing costume with which she decked herself—a rich, peacock-blue velvet brocade, with a mass of glittering and prismatic lusted beadwork and bangles about it—one of those daring and lurid combinations of colour and bronzy sparkles which can emanate only from the Parisian dress artistes, and which produce such a snaky and wicked effect on the beholder; just the kind of costume to suit a siren and fire the heart of an artist.

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Her bonnet was a marvel of crafty simplicity, reckless creases and eccentric discords, which somehow strangely harmonised in spite of their glaring opposition to orthodox colour harmony. In detail it appeared tawdry, flimsy and cheap-looking, also wretchedly put together. Yet it had cost enough to keep a poor family for a quarter of a year, and it harmonised in a wonderful way with that milky complexion and diabolic dress. The bonnet had been planned for the costume and the wearer by the most expensive man milliner in Paris. They gave her the appearance of a fashionable courtesan. Hat, hair, ears, neck and wrists were blazing with diamonds. Hyacinthine was dressing herself as if for some grand outdoor reception. As she looked in the mirror, after putting the final touch upon her face, she smiled at the reflection with malicious satisfaction.

‘Madam is supremely lovely this afternoon,’ whispered Delphine, admiringly. ‘Madam is going forth to conquer.’

‘I am going to see a man who has dared to look at me with indifference, and who has therefore insulted me,’ answered Hyacinthine, with a cruel laugh.

‘Is it possible, madam? Then his hour has come,’ said Delphine, emphatically.

‘Do you think so, child?’

‘Do I think so, madam? No, I am positive that this man, whoever he is, must succumb at once. No human being could resist such a *tout ensemble*. It is magnificent.’

‘We shall see, Delphine. He is not worth dressing for, but I hate to be scorned. We shall see,’ cried Hyacinthine, dramatically, as she scattered some heliotrope on her handkerchief and stuffed it into her bosom. Then with a farewell glance into the glass she sailed from her bower.

CHAPTER XVII

SEEDS OF JEALOUSY

ARNOLD KIRKLOCK left Deepwold in anything but a self-approving or happy state of mind. He had hampered himself with a woman whom he utterly despised, and lost the respect of a girl with whom he was almost in love. Almost in love! His feelings towards Beatrice had never been particularly engrossing nor ardent, possibly because the lady had not been too effusive. Love may exist and burn slowly, but it requires certain conditions to get into active combustion.

Yet, despite the unfortunate beginning of this affection, Arnold had not ceased to respect his girl lover. Her noble trust and infinite simplicity touched his conscience and kept it lively. He had betrayed this trust and abused that simplicity. But the treason seemed a trivial matter to his worldly method of looking at life.

Mrs Hart-Beachcomber was not the kind of woman that any man out of his callow teens could possibly have wasted a sentiment upon. Arnold regarded her as only a passing amusement. He had made up his mind to marry Beatrice. He admired her as much as he thought it likely he would ever admire any woman. She possessed all the qualities of person, intellect and education to give him satisfaction with her as a wife. In fact, now that he had resolved upon this honourable course, he felt settled and composed as to the future, and suffered no compunctions about this infidelity. So long as he did not get too interested about this adventure, or place her in any way as a rival to Beatrice, it did not trouble his mind any more than an evening spent at the Empire would have done.

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Of course there are amusements that men of the world indulge in both before and after marriage which they would not care for their lovers or wives to know anything about—amusements which run away with a good deal of their cash, and cause them to curse their own folly in most emphatic language afterwards. But so long as these can be kept dark and apart from the domestic portion of their lives, they do not consider that they are injuring those they honour and love. Man has always been a gregarious and a polygamous animal in his natural and ultra-civilised condition. While he honours and insists on faith, confidence and purity in the object of his affections he does not consider that he is bound by the same laws. With him discretion and secrecy denotes the honourable man. Friendship has sacred obligations to such a man, and love is a sentiment to be guarded carefully and kept strictly apart from all knowledge of how he and his herd amuse themselves when together.

Arnold had been intolerably bored with the stale witcheries of Mrs Hart-Beachcomber, and wished her at Jericho from the moment of his introduction. He was greatly annoyed also at Beatrice for picking up such an undesirable friend, although he could not say so to this girl whose very ignorance constituted her greatest charm. As for his own conduct, that did not trouble him, although the discovery made such an utter coward of him.

When he received that last note from his betrothed he read it through, and then with an oath tossed it over to his companion.

‘Read that, Hyacinthine. It ought to amuse you. We have been found out.’

‘Surely you don’t imagine that I care for the opinion of such a chit as that! This note shows me one thing plainly, however.’

‘Never mind what it shows you,’ Arnold exclaimed savagely. ‘What we have to consider now is, how best to get away from this place quietly, before the villagers hear of our escapade and give us a public reception with tin pans and dead cats, etc.’

‘They would never dare to treat people of our position in this coarse and vulgar fashion,’ cried Hyacinthine, with dis-

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dain, not unmixed with apprehension, as her memory suddenly recalled some of the customs of her own native village.

Arnold laughed shortly.

‘I do not intend to trust to the reverence of these Devonian rustics. I am going to catch this afternoon train up to town, and my advice to you is, don’t linger long behind, nor put too much faith in the protection of dignity.’

‘I shall go with you,’ answered Ilyacinthine, as she hastily withdrew to pack her trunks, leaving Arnold to finish his cigar.

‘Beastly nuisance the whole bally affair,’ he muttered, as he sat and chewed his moustache. ‘Beatrice is deuced foolish to take any notice of such a bit of nonsense, but I have not the pluck to face her, now that she has cut the ground from my feet for either explanation or excuses. I had better clear out till her wrath cools, and then do the penitent Johnny. Jolly awkward it will be even then with such a girl as she is. However, a week or two of absence may cause her to relent and forgive the prodigal.’

He had no intention at this time of abandoning the lover he had promised to marry. If he was not very deeply enamoured he was not quite a heartless villain, and meant to act honourably. Neither had his present been intended for the insult Beatrice looked upon it. It was sent as an olive branch, and as a sign that he wanted pardon. Arnold was at considerable pains to pick out a design which would mean tender regret, but Beatrice had hardly looked at it, and was in no mood to look for signs.

When they reached London he put Mrs Hart-Beachcomber into one cab, and took another himself for his own rooms. He had no desire for any more intimacy with this fascinator.

For the next few days he hung about London in a most dissatisfied state of mind. His clubs and the houses that he visited failed to interest him, for his mind was constantly dwelling upon Deepwold. He was waiting and longing for a letter from Beatrice, which would give him an opening to ask her forgiveness ; but none came.

When he got his present back he flew into a reasonless

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passion, and in a fit of spleen went off on a spell of dissipation, as men generally do when they have been thwarted. He knocked about the music-halls, pitched some money away on the cards, visited Villa Heloise, and generally played the ass all round, until he brought on a touch of the shakes. Then he went off to Buxton to recruit, and came back to London almost cured of his fancy, and half glad that it had been terminated so suddenly. Since Beatrice had banished him he was more willing to accept his dismissal and liberty. He had meant to act honourably. If she refused to let him, that was her look-out now, and no longer his concern.

On the first evening after his second return to London he sauntered into his club in Piccadilly. This soon bored him with its solemn and respectable dulness, where the only man present that he knew was Rontoul Chalky, the realistic author and critic; a cold-blooded fish composed of egotism, prying curiosity and witless filth. A few moments' conversation with this human octopus disgusted Arnold so utterly that he quitted the sumptuous hive of dreary ostentation, and proceeded eastward towards a more Bohemian club, of which he was also a member. Here at least he would encounter flesh and blood.

On entering this club he was fortunate enough to find a couple of actor friends, and his genial chum, Ned Lesslie, whom he had not met for the past two years. They were enjoying a witty story by that prince of dry humorists, old Riley, whom everyone in Bohemia knows and loves.

Presently other members drifted in and surrounded the popular Riley, which gave the two friends a chance of getting by themselves. Then over a cigar and a glass of grog they began to compare notes.

Edward Lesslie, the painter and teacher, was a young man of about twenty-seven years of age, and five feet nine inches in height. He was broad-shouldered, and of athletic build, having more of the appearance of a sailor than an artist, hence the title Neptune which Iduna had bestowed upon him.

He was rather^h pleasant than good-looking, with a healthy, ruddy and sunburnt countenance, bright and humorous

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blue eyes, wavy brown hair, and a crisp, close-trimmed, golden-brown beard and moustache. As Hyacinthine remarked, he did not seem a difficult fellow to draw out. He was a true Bohemian, reckless with his money when he had any, and made friends quickly.

Without being intimate friends, for the difference in their social position forbade this, Arnold Kirklock and Ned Lesslie had known each other for several years, and when they met were always on the best of terms. Lesslie was a hard worker, having married young, which forced him to keep the pot boiling by writing, teaching and illustrating, besides the more ambitious branches of his art. He had, however, produced pictures of decided ability, and was steadily advancing in his profession.

Arnold was a little surprised to find him at the club on this night, for as a rule his visits here were few and far between. He noticed also that his friend did not wear quite so happy an expression as he had been noted for when they last met. As they sat facing each other, with a small table between them, Lesslie seemed weary and anxious.

'Well, old chap, how are you getting on? I must look you up and see what you are up to. Going on all right, I suppose?'

'As usual,' replied the other. 'I have not yet set London on fire.'

'And Mrs Lesslie and the children?'

'Yes, they are well,' answered Ned, dejectedly; then with an air of solicitude he added, 'We have not met since that accident of yours. I heard what a narrow escape you had, but you look all right again.'

'Yes, I am better now, but it took a year to pull me through. It was the narrowest escape man ever had.'

'Do you know, Kirklock, my wife dreamt about that accident the night it happened, only, instead of you, it was me she saw riding down that hill. She was terribly nervous about it, and I was a bit impressed myself until I read the account of it in the papers. I wrote you about it, but I expect you did not get my letter.'

'No. I was not able to look at a letter for eight months.'

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‘Tell me all about it, old chap.’

Arnold Kirklock told the story of his life at Deepwold. He was glad to do so to such a sympathetic listener, for Ned always invited confidence. He was one of those men whom people generally unbosom themselves to and ask advice from.

Arnold told about his engagement to Beatrice, and the cause of it coming to an end so abruptly. He, however, was too ashamed of his own previous conduct to tell all. He left his friend to infer that it had been an honourable courtship.

With many uncomplimentary expressions he however described his intrigue with Hyacinthine, and unconsciously mentioned her name. When Lesslie heard who had broken off the courtship he started and frowned.

‘Do you know the—lady?’ asked Arnold, a little alarmed at his indiscretion.

‘Yes,’ replied Ned, slowly. ‘She has been taking painting lessons from me, but I have been forced to give her up as a private pupil. I did not know anything against her till now, only—well, the fact is, Kirklock, some busybodies have been putting ideas into my wife’s head respecting this person, and making it uncomfortable at home, so, to satisfy her mind, I thought it best to finish up the lessons.’

‘Quite right, old boy. Mrs Hart-Beachcomber is a bad egg, as I know to my cost.’

‘Ah, there was no danger in my case, for I was not even interested in her. She has vanity enough for twenty women, without a spark of talent to support it. Besides, as you know, our ideas don’t coincide in these matters, Arnold, and it would have been as well if you had kept yourself clear of this sordid affair and given yourself the safeguard I have—a good and true wife.’

‘Yes, dash it! I ought to have made an effort to run straight, for Beatrice Gray is one of the best; but I expect it is all over now between us, and I must look elsewhere for this shield.’

‘Yes, if this young lady is worth loving I don’t think she is likely to condone that offence, Arnold. You would hardly respect her if she could. And perhaps it is the

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best ending under the circumstances. Your mother will naturally expect you to look higher for a bride.'

Arnold sat gloomily gnawing his moustache as he listened. He wished he could summon up pluck to tell his friend the whole story, for he knew that Lesslie held very rigid notions concerning the obligations of men, and would have advised him differently if he knew all. But although he had no scruples of speaking about Hyacinthine freely, delicacy and shame forbade his tongue to sully the fair fame of Beatrice. Ned went on with his own confidence now that he had started. He also wanted to air his troubles.

'You know my wife, Kirklock, what a sensitive fine nature she has. I don't think any woman trusted a husband more completely than she did me until lately, and she had every right to trust, for I am more in love now than ever I was with her before we were married. Well, I suppose our felicity must have offended the gods, for lately—indeed within the last few days—there has been a concatenation of discords which threatens to destroy this happiness and change her whole nature.'

'I am sorry to hear this, old fellow,' answered Arnold, affectionately. 'If ever a man deserved an easy home life, you do, for you were a model husband. Tell me about these discords.'

'Well, first it was this infernal woman. She was always flinging herself in my way and hanging on to me. Admiration for my abilities, you know, and that sort of rubbish. I had mentioned her casually to my wife, as I do about most of my pupils. Then someone told her that I was infatuated, and she asked me to dismiss her. I did so at once, and thought the subject over. But the seed had been planted too carefully. Next came an anonymous letter, which she received—the most beastly letter to a husband that a wife could have got. It was supposed to come from some low girl to me, speaking of former endearments, and asking me to visit her soon again.'

'That was a damnable bit of business,' said Arnold, indignantly. 'How did you get out of it?'

'I have not got out of it, that's part of the trouble, and God only knows when I shall be able to pluck

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that suspicion from her roused mind,' answered Ned, bitterly.

'And, do you know, I innocently asked her to read it. I was busy at a sketch when the letters came that night—the night before last it was. My poor wife laid all the letters beside me on the table, and I asked her to open and read them to me. That cursed, lying epistle was the one she opened first.'

'By Jove! what did you do?'

'I was so interested in my work that for a few moments after I heard her open the envelope I did not notice that she was reading it to herself. Then, glancing aside carelessly, I saw her face, white and devilish. The sight of that expression made my heart stand still; she looked as if she was losing her senses. Suspecting some evil news, I said, alarmed,—

"What is it, Grace?"

'Then she turned on my face a blazing, scrutinising pair of dark eyes and answered with a fierce laugh,—

"It is a nice letter. Read it for yourself."

'She watched me closely while I glanced it over, feeling murderous at the unknown sender, but with a wild effort I kept cool, and pitching it on the table carelessly and quietly said, "Some enemy of mine, I expect, wrote this. One of my discarded models, I suppose."'

'The fact of your giving her the letter to read ought to have removed her suspicion.'

'So it would had her mind not been poisoned about Mrs Hart-Beachcomber. But the two together and what came after finished her up. She will listen to nothing I say now, and I am at my wit's end nearly.'

'Was there more?' inquired Arnold.

'Oh, yes. It never rains but it pours misfortunes. My remark about the model proved to be the most unlucky explanation I could have made. I had actually dismissed a model for drunkenness that very day, and I was thinking it might be her. To-day this model has been to my house, liking a raving maniac with drink, giving me a delightful character. I have had to set the police on her tracks in order to prove that she has been lying. Now I expect I

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shall have to face the police-court and have the matter thrashed out there. It is a pleasant outlook, isn't it, for a fellow in my position?'

'I'll help you, dear boy, out of this,' cried Arnold, with emphasis. 'Expect me to-morrow afternoon at your studio, and we shall consider how this tissue of mistakes and suspicions may be destroyed.'

The friends rose, as it was getting late, and with a warm handshake parted, promising to meet the next day.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT THE STUDIO

THE woman who marries a figure-painter must have implicit trust in his affection and honour, also be entirely above jealousy if she desires a happy life. It is not necessary for her to understand his aims or sympathise with his tastes. Indeed, the best wife for an artist is the woman who understands how to make him comfortable, and who is able to leave him unmolested to his dreams. She begins her union with a formidable rival which she must not attempt to dethrone nor interfere with. She can never possess her husband completely, which the natural woman who loves passionately ever desires. She must be satisfied with his heart, and let his artistic fancy wander as it likes.

Grace Lesslie seemed to be the right woman for her husband during the five years they had been mated, and their happiness had been perfect until Hyacinthine Hart-Beachcomber appeared on the scene with her worthy satellites. A most intense woman in her temperament, and passionately attached to her husband, yet she had been hitherto singularly free from jealousy, where there even seemed better causes than the present one. She had allowed her husband such unlimited license and liberty as to make narrower natures question if she cared for him at all.

His life was filled with what might have been temptations to a weaker or less conscientious and grosser man. Ladies who came as pupils, to give him sittings for portraits, or to idle an hour or two in his studio. Models as perfect in shape and feature as the world could produce knocked constantly at the door of that artistically-furnished studio and private class room. These models were of every nationality

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and of all shades of complexion, and they treated him with the most unconventional familiarity, for he never went in for dignity. They chattered and gossiped to him when they posed à la Nature, and called him Ned as his male friends were in the habit of doing. Yet Grace had never experienced a shadow of uneasiness for either his past pupils, patrons or models. •

He went into all kinds of places seeking for subjects, and made acquaintances which would have ruined the reputation of anyone but an artist. Disreputable people before this had made themselves disagreeable and maligned him, yet his wife had never even insulted him before by a doubt. She knew what art demanded and enjoyed the admiration which her husband received, sure of his love and confident in his fidelity.

She was a lovely woman of the brunette order, with melting brown eyes, heavy lids and vivid complexion. Happiness and contentment had sat on her smiling lips until within the past week. Her husband and her children had been the centre of her thoughts, and if any prophet had told her that she would ever change, she would have scouted the idea as preposterous.

Athena had lied when she described the home of the artist as a hovel. It was a comfortable and well-furnished flat, always kept in the best order, and it was not out of necessity that Mrs Lesslie acted as nurse to her three children, but because she was too true a mother to trust them with strangers. Her servant had been out on that unfortunate day when the weird sisters invaded the establishment with such dire results.

Edward Lesslie sat in his studio on the afternoon succeeding his interview with Arnold Kirklock. He had just dismissed a model he was painting as he was not up to work that day. It was one of a barrack of large studios near Earl's Court, furnished with all the quaint and rich paraphernalia which a portrait-painter requires as accessories to his profession—carved cabinets filled with china and bronzes; rich rugs, skins, tapestries and armour, which covered portions of the polished wood floor and those spaces of the subdued-tinted walls which were not covered

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with unfinished sketches and framed works. The effect was picturesque and barbaric.

Facing the artist, where he was stretched on a well-worn morocco couch, was his easel, with a large unfinished canvas on it representing a classic scene with nude figures. This was his next Academy picture, which he had begun with ardent enthusiasm, but now looked discontentedly at. For the past week his work had not progressed. To-day he was almost despairing over it.

As he lay at full length he smoked furiously from a well-coloured meerschaum, and filled the apartment with dense clouds. It was past three now and he had forgotten all about his lunch. He was brooding on the unhappy state of affairs between himself and his wife, and wondering how it would all end.

Grace had developed rapidly under this new phase, and now, instead of meeting him with smiles when he went home, made his life miserable with bitter words and icy looks. He felt that it was not a quarrel that time would be likely to cure, for his wife's intensity of temperament was against this. As for explanation, she who had believed his lightest word before had now become an inveterate doubter. She laid traps for him and watched him like an enemy. Scoffed at his attempts at reconciliation, and showed by every action that she thought the very worst of him. The foul weed jealousy had taken long to find a root in that ardent, trusting heart, but now its growth was rapid; already it had choked all tenderness and sympathy. For the past few days they had occupied different rooms—her doing, not his. If he had not loved her so utterly, this cruelty and injustice would have roused his indignation, but he saw the hell of misery she was in and pitied her too deeply for anger to find a place in his breast. All his hatred was towards those who had wrought this change, all his thoughts centred on finding the means to restore her peace and his own.

If he could only discover who had planted this weed, he felt that he might defeat them, but his wife would not confide in him. He had given the anonymous letter to a detective with a list of all the people he knew, and at

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present he must possess himself with what patience he had. He was utterly miserable, and compared the past and the present with poignant anguish. Was this to be the end of that thrilling courtship and happy marriage? His wife to become his mortal foe? He felt as if much more of it would make him unfit for any future work. He feared also for the reason of his poor wife. She had not slept for three nights, for he could hear her through the thin walls moaning and walking about in a frenzy of passion. She was not the kind of woman to shed tears and be easily consoled.

As he lay, filled with the most morbid reflections, a loud knock sounded on his panels. With a muttered curse at the untimely interruption he rose and opened the door.

It was with feelings a good deal stronger than disgust that Edward Lesslie beheld the radiant vision of Mrs Hart-Beachcomber, with her tawdry-dressed parasite, before him, and in the rear a confectioner's girl with a tea-tray. He could not help frowning in response to the winning smile of the siren, but politeness forced him to fall back and admit them.

'Oh, you rude fellow! I believe you are not in the least pleased to see me, and I have come, too, on purpose to forgive you for your late insulting behaviour.'

Hyacinthine spoke archly as she sailed into the studio, with a metallic jingling of beads and discs, followed by the goddess Iduna and the lady waitress. Edward Lesslie growled out something about having a beastly headache and being busy. He abhorred the sight of this fascinating lady after what his friend Kirklock had told him, and the disaster which she had brought into his life. He also resented the vulgar liberty she had taken in ordering tea to be sent to his studio, but he was too easy-natured to expose his resentment in words. He only looked his discomfort, which she ignored.

'Ah, what a fortunate inspiration it was that I should think about tea as we came along, Iduna. It will refresh us all, banish your headache, Mr Lesslie, and, I hope, put you in a more amiable temper.'

'At the same time, I wish you had not taken this trouble, Mrs Beachcomber.'

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‘Hart-Beachcomber, if you please, sir,’ interrupted Hyacinthine, bridling up instantly, while Iduna looked terrified at the threatened explosion.

‘Mrs Hart-Beachcomber,’ continued the artist, with a stiff bow. ‘I have a janitor on the premises who looks after my visitors when I invite them to take tea with me.’

Hyacinthine suddenly remembered what she had come for, and checked her natural inclination to rush into abuse. With a flush, however, she burst into a forced peal of merriment, and said gaily,—

‘Ah, but we invited ourselves, didn’t we, Iduna? And now I mean to play hostess if you do not order us out like a surly bear.’

Edward Lesslie shrugged his shoulders and resigned himself to the inevitable. Then the waitress set down the tray on a table and retired, while Hyacinthine drew up a chair and began to fill the cups and cut the cake.

‘Now, pray tell us what is the matter with you, Mr Lesslie, also what “poor me” has done to offend your lordship. You look as grumpy as if it was rejection day and the Academy had requested you to send for your picture. Doesn’t he, Iduna?’

‘Hi, hi!’ giggled the goddess. ‘You are so excruciatingly clever, dearest Juliet, that I must laugh. But now that I look carefully at Neptune I can see that he is troubled about something. Do tell us, Neptune, what it is.’

Edward Lesslie regarded his visitors impatiently for a moment. Iduna he looked upon as a hopeless idiot whose childish silliness was unworthy of notice. Mrs Hart-Beachcomber had always been an unwelcome intruder to his studio, but now he loathed her as something polluting. Her splendid costume did not appeal in the least, although his artistic senses noted its effect. He had never even admired her borrowed charms. But to-day he thought her positively hideous, and wished he could have had the brutality to turn them both neck and crop out.

‘There is nothing the matter with me, madam,’ he answered coldly. ‘Only that I am extra engaged this afternoon, and expect a visitor on urgent business presently, therefore—’

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‘You wish to get rid of us, I understand. A pretty and interesting model coming by appointment. Well, we shall not intrude longer than to drink our tea and see you drink yours.’

Hyacinthine handed him a cup as she spoke, gazing at him tenderly and reproachfully as she did so. He took the cup sulkily, and, refusing her offer of cake, gulped down the contents hastily and replaced the cup. He remained standing while he did so.

‘Now, Mr Bear, if you won’t let us sympathise with you in your trouble, kindly tell me why you sent back my quarter’s money for lessons?’

‘I fancy I wrote my reasons, madam. Press of other work prevents me taking any more engagements of this kind.’

‘But you were already engaged to me.’

‘Not for ever, madam,’ replied Edward, with a forced laugh. ‘I had already fulfilled any previous obligations, and felt at liberty to cancel any future arrangements.’

‘But you have other pupils still,’ persisted Hyacinthine, with an angry gleam in her eyes.

‘I am meditating giving up teaching altogether. It interferes with work I like better. You really must accept this as my reason for declining the honour you do me, and also take my decision as unalterable. I can recommend some other teacher to you if you still wish to go on with your studies. You will have no difficulty in finding lots of instructors as good and better than I am.’

‘Oh, yes, that is all well enough, but I liked your system, and also like you.’

She said this in her sweetest accents, and cast her most languishing glance at him, but he merely bowed again and remained silent. Hyacinthine began to fear that her fine costume had been put on in vain, and that she would have to depend upon Athena for the news she thirsted after. He seemed to be an insensible boor.

‘At anyrate,’ she observed, rising gracefully and spreading out her skirts, ‘you surely will not object to me coming occasionally to see you as an admirer of your works, and bringing some of my wealthy friends to see your pictures. I fancy I can secure you a few generous customers.’

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Edward flushed to the roots of his hair at her insolent tone of patronage, but he did not like to be rude. He therefore stammered out awkwardly, resolving to give instructions to the janitor to say he was always out in future to Mrs Hart-Beachcomber.

‘Thank you, madam. I shall be pleased to see you and your friends, only, I fear if they want my pictures they will have to go to my dealer for them, as I am under engagement to sell only through him.’

‘Oh, you obdurate man !’ cried Hyacinthine, going up and tapping him playfully with her sunshade ; then petulantly she added, ‘ And you have never made a single remark about my pretty dress, which, I assure you, I put on solely to please your artistic eyes.’

‘I have been admiring it ever since you entered,’ answered Edward, gallantly. ‘It is quite a creation of masterly colour.’

At this moment another sharp knock sounded on the door. Edward hurried over to answer it.

‘The model, Iduna ! Observe his eagerness to admit her. Now our curiosity will be satisfied,’ cried Hyacinthine, dramatically, as she turned with an expectant smile on her painted lips.

Edward opened the door, and then started back with dismay.

Before him stood his wife, accompanied by the malicious Athena—that is, Miss Kerenhappuch Hurdle.

CHAPTER XIX

HYACINTHINE'S COMEDY

THE start back was fatal. To the distorted fancy of the tortured woman it looked conscious guilt. The low laugh of Athena also showed that she interpreted it in the same sense.

'You did not expect to see me here, Edward, and seem by no means rejoiced at the surprise.'

Grace Lesslie uttered these words in a husky voice, while she looked at her husband with a fierce glitter in her dry, bloodshot eyes. In an instant his heart fell like lead, and every hope seemed to die within him.

'No. I did not expect you, Grace, but you are very welcome. Come inside.'

He spoke quietly; and went backwards from her, allowing her to enter, and ignoring her companion. Athena chuckled again.

Grace entered with quick, jerky steps, and flashed one burning glance at her supposed rival. Then she burst out with a strident laugh.

'Ha! ha! ha! Other visitors, I perceive, and enjoying a quiet cup of tea. Most homelike and comfortable, I am sure. Mrs Hart-Beachcomber, I presume, a lady I am so pleased to meet, since she is such a kind friend to my dear husband. You were quite correct, Miss Hurdle, to tell me I should find her here at this hour—her usual hour, I understand. Oh yes, I have heard so much about you that I am overjoyed to meet you at last.'

She blurted out the words rapidly, yet with a mocking hilarity and shrillness that were startling. Edward quickly closed the door, and stood with his back to it, speechless. It was a situation beyond his control.

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Grace paused abruptly and looked Hyacinthine over so intently that Mrs Hart-Beachcomber began to feel most uncomfortable in spite of her superior advantages of dress. The poor woman whom she and her parasites had nearly driven insane had not taken any trouble to dress herself, and now appeared in a most dishevelled state. Hyacinthine turned to Edward angrily.

'Why don't you introduce this—lady, who appears to know me, Mr Lesslie?'

'Oh, there is no need for introductions, Mrs Hart-Beachcomber, and my husband is too shy at present to do so if there was. I am Mrs Lesslie—his lawful wife—and I know what you are. Now let us all be comfortable together. You have a husband also, I have heard Edward say. I hope to have the pleasure of making his acquaintance. It will be so agreeable, will it not, Mrs Hart-Beachcomber?'

'I believe the woman is mad,' whispered Hyacinthine to Iduna. 'It was wrong of Athena to bring her here.'

'Oh, dear, no, I am not mad,' retorted Grace, quickly, her tensioned hearing catching the whisper. 'I am only coming to my senses, as my dear, faithful husband can tell you.'

The horrible situation was becoming unendurable to the wretched man, and yet he knew not what to do to bring it to a close. Explanations were useless. Nothing he could say could now appease this adored but distracted woman who had changed so terribly, and who was now covering him with shame. The two witches looked delighted, and were giggling inordinately, while Hyacinthine shrunk back with cowardly fear. It was, therefore, with mighty relief that he heard another rat-a-tat on the door, and opening it swiftly, he admitted his friend, Arnold Kirklock.

'Help me, old chap,' Edward murmured, as he grasped his friend's hand convulsively. 'I am in a devil of a mess.'

Arnold gave him a reassuring grip, and entering, took in the affair in a single glance.

'My dear Mrs Lesslie, how are you? So glad to see you. Ah, Hyacinthine, so you have kept your appointment and reached here before me. I trust I have not kept you waiting long.'

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He plunged forward to Mrs Hart-Beachcomber, and with a warning glance at her he shook her hand most effusively.

Hyacinthine, for a wonder, understood his glance, and in her joy at having him to protect her, became his accomplice.

'Ned is such a dear, good fellow, Mrs Lesslie, that I know he will excuse me making his studio a rendezvous without warning him. But I wanted to see Mrs Hart-Beachcomber on some important business, and also get some advice from Ned, so I wrote and asked her to meet me here and save valuable time.'

Arnold rattled off these lies as glibly and cheerily as if they were truths. Grace looked staggered.

'Do you mean to tell me that she came here to meet you and not my husband?'

'Certainly, my dear Mrs Lesslie. Good heavens! What could she want with Ned?' asked Arnold, with an air of astonishment.

'Certainly I came here expressly to meet my friend Mr Kirklock, and not your husband,' replied Hyacinthine, haughtily. 'I have already finished my course of lessons with your husband, as I thought he must have told you. I am too busily engaged at present to take any more painting lessons.'

'Oh, my God!' moaned the mystified and unhappy wife, sinking into a chair and covering her burning eyes with her hand. Iduna and Athena looked deeply disappointed.

There was an awkward pause now, which none could find suitable words to break. They all looked silently at Grace, and waited. At this embarrassing moment another knock sounded on the door, and Edward once more opened it to admit a stranger.

He was a tall, broad-shouldered, large-footed, full-eared individual, dressed in a tweed suit, with a black, broad felt hat, which he carried in his hand as he entered the studio, bowing awkwardly, yet deliberately and stiffly.

'I come from the police, Mr Lesslie,' he said, looking round inquiringly on the company. 'My name is Sergeant Quick.'

'Ah, take a seat, sergeant,' answered Edward, with eager-

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ness, pointing to an empty chair, on which the visitor leisurely seated himself.

'I think we had better go now,' whispered Hyacinthine to Arnold as she took hold of his arm.

'No. Wait a few moments, and then I shall be at your service. Ned may want me for a little while.'

Hyacinthine sat also down on her chair, and gazed inquisitively at the police-agent, who was regarding her with admiration. She did not mind waiting, for she sniffed a mystery. The weird sisters also drew nearer with inquiring eyes.

'I have come respecting that case which you placed in our hands,' began the sergeant, looking at his hat. 'We have got the woman.'

'Yes,' said Edward.

'She turns out to be a very respectable woman, with a husband. She takes occasionally a drop too much, but she is a most respectable young woman.'

Mrs Lesslie was now leaning forward and watching her husband intently while she listened.

'She takes too many drops to please me,' answered Edward, gruffly. 'As for her respectability, I doubt that greatly after the manner in which she has behaved.'

'She is a most respectable married woman for all that,' repeated the sergeant, stolidly. 'And she has made some very serious charges against you, sir, which might land you in the divorce court if her husband wasn't a poor man.'

Arnold, the experienced, saw the drift of the worthy police-sergeant's ponderous communication, and he stepped forward quickly.

'Now, stop that, my man, if you don't want to be chucked out of this room. You have caught this woman who has been molesting my friend Mr Lesslie, whose character is beyond the like of her smirching. Now, tell us what your instructions are, and be done with it.'

'There never yet was smoke but there was fire behind it,' answered the sergeant, sententiously. 'At least, that is my experience, after many years in the force.'

Arnold commenced to roll up his sleeves, but Edward stopped him with a word.

HYACINTHINE'S COMEDY

'Let him alone, Arnold, he cannot injure me any more than I am already. Go on, sergeant.'

'Yes, let the officer tell his story,' cried Grace, wildly. 'He is only speaking the truth. I have smelt the smoke and I want to see the fire. Don't try to smother it.'

'Thank you, ma'am,' said the sergeant, turning towards her with a nod of approval. 'You are a sensible woman as knows these things will happen in the best-regulated families. Well, the point of my remark is this: Here is a respectable married woman swears things agin a gentleman which may be true or not. My experience goes with the female's statements, but that's a detail. Here is a gentleman with a character to keep up who wants to prosecute her. I come here in a friendly spirit and give you *Punch's* advice respecting matrimony, which is "Don't." It can do you no good if you punish the woman, but a deal of harm. Square her if you can. That is the tip of one as knows how them things work out. Don't appear agin her, and I'll undertake to keep her quiet for a five-pound note.'

Edward looked uneasy but vacillating, while Arnold spoke up with energy, taking out his pocket-book at the same time.

'By Jove! the man is correct, Ned. It's worth five pounds to drop this prosecution. What do you say?'

'I say certainly not,' cried Grace, shrilly. 'If my husband is an innocent man, let him prosecute this infamous woman. If he is guilty then let him bribe her to silence.'

'I quite agree with you, Mrs Lesslie,' said Hyacinthine, firmly. 'Prosecute the low creature by all means.'

'We certainly think the same,' echoed the two sisters.

'Well, ladies,' replied the sergeant, rising deliberately, 'I am sorry to find you all agreed about a very foolish business. I don't say, mind you, that Mr Lesslie is guilty, whatever I may think; but mark my words, the world will conclude that he is, whatever he swears in court.'

'There, my man,' said Arnold, shoving a five-pound note into the officer's willing hand. 'Square the female and keep this disgusting scandal out of court.'

'You are the most sensible party present,' observed the

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large, solid and considerate officer, making his bow and shambling out of the door. 'I'll work the oracle so that Mr Lesslie is no longer troubled with this respectable married woman. Depend on me to give her a proper warning, and thank you all kindly.'

Grace watched his departure with a hard, mocking smile on her pallid lips. She was sitting now with her elbow on her knee, and her chin in her hand, gazing steadily in front of her, with that hard smile on her lips. Edward, as he looked at her, saw that her eyes appeared smaller and more concentrated in the iris.

'Let us go now,' whispered Hyacinthine to Arnold, rising slowly.

'Yes. We had better go now,' answered Arnold in the same tones, as he glanced timidly at the woman sitting there oblivious of everything.

Hyacinthine and the sisters skipped towards the door after Arnold, without saying good-bye to Mrs Lesslie. They also were awed at the strange, uncanny expression on her face. It was fearsome.

At the door Arnold beckoned Edward out, and when he got him into the lobby he said,—

'Old fellow, take Mrs Lesslie home as quickly as you can and see a doctor about her. I am awfully sorry for you, but I think this has been too much for her nerves.'

'She received and read the letter, Juliet,' whispered Athena, gleefully, as they waited on the coming of Arnold.

'Hush!' answered Hyacinthine, shuddering, with her finger at her lip. 'I thought my hour had at last come and that she was about to murder me. I am so glad to be out of it safely.'

The sister goddesses went home to discuss the scene, a trifle subdued, yet giggling over the success of their apish malice, while Hyacinthine drove her captive home to dinner. Afterwards she succeeded in getting her matinee expenses out of him and enjoyed herself very much at the theatre. He did not mind shelling out five hundred pounds for her good-natured assistance in the studio. The sum was a trifle to him, which he thought well spent in friendship's

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cause. Men of his kind make stauncher friends than they do lovers.

Meanwhile, Edward went back to his wife. She was still crouching on the chair with that concentrated gaze fixed on vacancy. Her eyes were no longer soft and velvety, but brightly hard, like the brown glass beads in a stuffed bird. The husband shivered with apprehension as he drew closer to his wife.

‘Grace!’

She paid no attention to him, but a crafty smile curved her lips as she peered at vacancy as if watching something.

‘Yes. Now I know all about it, and why they all have to obey him. They are devils and he is the master spirit. Of course, what was I thinking of not to see it all before? They must obey his hellish commands. This she-devil with the serpent scales and the dead face is Sin who sat at the gate with her two monkeys. The other one who tried to deceive me is Beelzebub, the god of lies.’

The wretched woman was talking to herself in a monotonous and meditative tone as if trying to solve an ordinary puzzle. Her eyes grew more gimlety and restless, while the smile became foolish. Edward watched her despairingly, for his heart felt broken.

‘What I should like to know is how they ever managed to get me into their clutches. I have not committed any mortal sin that I know of, except perhaps loving too much. I thought he was an angel and worshipped him. Ah! that must have been how the demons snared my soul. I forgot God for this devil.’

‘Ah, Grace, my darling, wake up and come home to your children.’

He put his hand upon her shoulder, but at the touch she shrunk as if she had been burnt.

‘Don’t touch me, for God’s sake, you master devil!’ she wildly shrieked, cowering down on the floor and covering her eyes. ‘I have no children. What I thought to be children were only hell-spawn. Let me go free and keep your serpent-witch wife. Oh, Jesus! Save me from the power of the devil.’

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With these terrible words Grace Lesslie fell forward upon her face and lay still.

Edward lifted her to the couch and ran out for a cab. Then when he had taken her home he sent for a doctor.

When next she woke from that fit she was a raving maniac, and had to be removed to an asylum. So the little innocent comedy which Hyacinthine had planned ended in a tragedy, and Edward Lesslie's life was blighted.

CHAPTER XX

THE MATINEE

ARTEMUS BORRYMORE managed to get a good number of his most pressing debts included in the expenses of that matinee. He also played all the tricks at his command to keep it from being a dead failure—not financially, for his greatest endeavour was to keep the paying and disinterested public away—but socially.

He advertised the performance in the papers because he dare not burke that duty. He likewise spent some money in artistically got-up posters, for Hyacinthine superintended this part of the business with a keen and jealous attention. Dudley Hardy was employed to draw one of his smart designs. A full-length portrait of the performers in colours was likewise carried about the streets by sandwich men and placed in shop windows. For a week previous to the matinee Hyacinthine drove about the streets seeing reproductions of herself scattered about, and feeling that at last she was famous.

But Artemus was a past master in the composition of bills, advertisements and posters, and knew exactly how to word them so that they would fail in rousing public interest. He was able to do this with perfect safety by playing on the lady's passion to be considered select and refined. He avoided all sensational expressions as vulgar, and adroitly insinuated that Mrs Hart-Beachcomber was a lady amateur who condescended to give this single performance for her own amusement. This ruse of his delighted his employer and effectually quenched any desire in outsiders to spend their money on stale recitations by an unknown amateur.

The leading critics, of course, would not have wasted an afternoon, even had invitations been sent to them, but this

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Artemus most prudently avoided. She would naturally expect to see lengthy notices in the principal papers, but he could easily explain afterwards that their money could not run to the heavy bribes required by these distinguished journalists. It is always easy for a diplomatic agent to soothe the vanity of a disappointed performer by calling the unapproachable pressmen blackmailers, and a bad notice as the effect of personal prejudice.

A few of the insignificant papers he managed to secure, for the sake of his advertisements and because he personally knew the editors or reporters, to let his client off lightly, and even to praise her appearance and costumes. When he had these gentlemen on the spot he resolved to make them see things in a rosy light with the aid of first-class champagne and choice cigars. He would not find much difficulty in keeping these young gents most of the time in front of the bar.

Yet he worked during that week for his salary and expenses by inducing as many of his own friends to come as he could. He frankly told them what to expect, but put it as a special favour to himself for them to show up and make the sacrifice.

'She is a duffer, dear boy, but I must get her a full and appreciative house, or it will be domino with me. She has lots of cash to chuck away, and my affairs are in too desperate a strait for me to get her monkey up.'

As he belonged to Bohemia, he did not appeal in vain to his generous but impecunious friends. They promised to back him up on the momentous occasion and drink at Hyacinthine's expense to her success.

Mrs Hart-Beachcomber he also sent packing about amongst her old ladies, parsons and acquaintances, to drag them in by hook or crook. Then he turned, like the man who gave a great feast, to the byways, and flooded the hall with paper. By the time his free guests were placed he had very little room for outsiders. Artemus could now breathe freely and devote himself to the formation of his dramatic touring company. Hyacinthine would have an indulgent audience for her *début*, and find no flies in her honey-pot.

One point of danger he had failed to protect in spite of

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his most wily endeavours. This was the keeping away of those two enthusiastic admirers and goddesses, Athena and Iduna. Hyacinthine insisted on their presence and support on the stage, and the thought of what the effect would be on his humorous friends made Artemus prepare with anxious horror. They would, he felt, be sufficient to damn even the best actress, but with her—well—roasting was hardly the word for his anticipations. Doubtless his Bohemian friends would be amused if he was not. He could only trust that they would be able to control their risible faculties at the critical moments, and remember the champagne and whiskys if they for the time forgot the obligations of friendship. It was an appalling ordeal, however, for him to face as a manager.

Amongst the few strangers who paid for back seats was the timid and unrecognised husband of the fair reciter. He came faultlessly dressed for the occasion. In this branch of decorum he could not go astray, and he was attired more like a punctilious Frenchman than a careless Englishman. From his collar to his varnished boots everything was in perfect order, and quite new.

He, however, slid through the doorway, obsequiously and meekly, as a well-trained waiter and valet does when he is rung for. He held his head on an angle, and drew his legs after him instead of advancing them. He was the symbol of humility and self-depreciation, one who only coveted and courted anonymity.

As he slunk towards the box-office, with his shilling between his fore-finger and thumb, he had to run the gauntlet of Artemus Borrymore and a number of his friends who were with him watching the people entering. The fact of him preparing to pay for his pass with coin instead of paper made him a more conspicuous object than he cared to be, as he observed with his shifty side glances, therefore he hung his head more dejectedly than usual, and muttered his request in an almost inaudible voice.

Lord Fabro and Arnold Kirklock, who were in the lobby, having been forced to patronise the performance, recognised the sad-visaged young man; the first surprised to see him paying, and the second at seeing him there at all.

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‘Hullo, Wilcox!’ cried his lordship, then he remembered how he had been cautioned by Hyacinthine against revealing her husband, and he added, ‘I have something to tell you, Wilcox, come here.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ answered the ex-valet, starting, and bowing as he turned to follow his lordship to a deserted part of the lobby.

‘Come to patronise the new reciter, Wilcox?’ said Arnold, who recognised him only as one of his club waiters.

‘Yes, sir. I was passing, and thought I’d like to hear her. She is very good, I hear.’

‘Oh, quite a phenomenon. You have a treat before you, Wilcox,’ replied Arnold, with a laugh. ‘The husband of Hyacinthine turned a shade greyer as he heard that mocking laugh, and passed on more dejectedly to where his former master was waiting for him.’

‘I say, Wilcox, I have found a place in the market which, I fancy, would suit you. A highly-respectable and well-patronised hotel near Birmingham.’

‘I am much obliged to your lordship. I have already given in my notice at the club, but I was thinking of going to Australia.’

‘A capital idea,’ answered Lord Fabro, eagerly. ‘Of course you will take your wife with you. I shall be able to help you both out there, and will give you a good start off. There is no place like the Colonies for a man of energy as you are, Wilcox.’

‘I am afraid she will not go with me, particularly after to-day. I have also saved enough with my own speculations not to impose upon your lordship’s kindness any farther,’ said the young man, hesitatingly.

‘Nonsense! You must try to persuade her to give this folly up, Wilcox. She is a clever little woman, but not in this line, as you will hear for yourself. Go in now and meet me here during the interval. I wish to help you both if I can.’

‘Thank you, my lord.’

With a meek inclination William Wilcox turned from his lordship and glided like a shadow into the hall. There he crept into the last seat and became merged within the shadow of the wall. It was a ludicrous yet, to him, tragic

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exhibition of artless and obtuse feminine vanity, united with utter incompetence, which this devoted if spiritless husband sat and looked at. As he hung his head with hopeless shame, large drops of agony started out and stood upon his pallid brow. He sat crouching in the shadow of the corner, his head drooping and his hands clutched together, with his hat and cane between them. His eyes were dull and expressionless, however, when he glanced up furtively and occasionally, and his features remained rigid. No one, to look at this sickly, uninteresting face, could have guessed the anguish he suffered, or how the remarks and mocking bursts of laughter from those around him stabbed him like jagged knives.

Hyacinthine came upon the stage with her two satellites, perfectly self-possessed. As her husband looked at those dreadful attendants, his lean jaws worked convulsively with impotent fury. He had heard of their baleful influence from the sympathetic Delphine, although he saw them now for the first time.

Had his wife no sense of the ridiculous that she allowed herself to be placed in such an absurd juxtaposition? The wild burst of uproarious applause with which their appearance was greeted, from that good-humoured but jeering audience, surely must open her eyes to her own fatuity. But no. He was fated to endure all the shame she ought to have felt in silent misery. Hyacinthine was smiling and bowing delightedly, while her foils were bobbing also, and curtsying with the most maddening exaggeration. From their different points of view the manager and the husband were both writhing at the unbounded delight of the audience.

Hyacinthine had no sense either of propriety or the ridiculous. Her sole idea in dragging her two parasites on the stage was to make use of them as foils to her own matchless graces and her elaborate toilet. She was right in this respect, for certainly their withered, apish faces and tawdry, home-made æsthetic and skimped dresses imparted extra freshness to her carefully-prepared face, and gave more point to her rich, early Italian costume. Still, these doubtful advantages were gained at the expense of what

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she was there to achieve. The presence of the two goddesses proved the death-blow to any serious attention. Their grimaces and shrilly-expressed chorus of senseless admiration made them the centre of attraction. It was like a scene in the pantomime where the clown and pantaloon convulses the audience while the princess is trying to play sentiment.

'By Jove! those pair of oddities are simply killing,' observed Lord Fabro, as he wiped his eyes, to the squirming Artemus. 'I have not wept like this for years. You have created a success where I expected failure. Permit me to congratulate you on your delicious and unexpected farce, Borrymore.'

'Oh, damn congratulations! Come and have a drink,' growled the manager, mopping his steaming face.

'No, dear boy. This is far too good to miss. We must applaud them to the echo. They are immense, and ought to make your fortune if you work them properly.'

Like Lord Fabro, the rest of the audience were rolling on their seats with Rabbelaian laughter. As each of the pieces terminated they thundered their applause, while Hyacinthine genuflected and swept her train to their frantic calls with a heart swollen nearly to bursting with gratified vanity.

She saw the front row of old ladies nodding their heads with approval as she received her ovations. She saw rapturous delight printed on the grinning faces behind, and with her ears filled with their noisy acclamations, clapping of hands and hammering of sticks, she read complete victory. While she was reciting she never looked at her audience, although she faced them, and she heard only her own exquisite voice and the mingled shrieks of Athena and Iduna. That these unconsciously comic actresses divided, nay engrossed, the attention of the audience never entered her mind for a single instant.

Artemus Borrymore had vanished into the bar with a few thirsty and stoical friends, who preferred whisky and soda to pantomime. But the neglected husband sat and endured his excruciating torture to the bitter end of the first part. He was watching his wife with stealthy yet hungry glances, and drinking in her wretched delivery with

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tingling ears. He saw and heard everything, although he kept his head bowed on his meagre chest—the brutal truths from those nearest to him when their attention was for a moment diverted to the centre figure who was tearing the lines to tatters and adding to the farce with her exaggerated gestures; the roar that burst out when Athena and Iduna rapturously clasped their hands and rolled up their eyes or otherwise contorted themselves on their chairs and thus made magnets of themselves. Every instant the fire glowed hotter under the grid on which the poor man wriggled.

He was a sensitive man, and in spite of her undeviating cruelty he was infatuated with this woman who was in the eyes of the law his wife. He had courted and married her in all good faith, believing that she loved him in return, and that she was a virtuous girl. His eyes had been opened and his heart seared, but his love still remained, like a cureless cancer, to torture him constantly.

He was immeasurably her superior in mental qualities and critical acumen. "The man who has acted for years as valet to a gentleman of culture and power must imbibe many of his master's tastes and accomplishments. It is like living constantly beside and listening to a tutor.

William Wilcox had seen and heard the best actors and listened to the most erudite scholars and critics while with his lordship and at the exclusive club where he served, and he was gifted besides with correct and natural taste. Love could not blind him to the fact that his wife was at present making a laughing-stock of herself, and that she was destitute of the qualities to make even the most mediocre of actresses. While he was forced to admit that the people were right in their merciless mockery, his fatal fondness filled him with dull fury against those who were at present deluding her. But he was powerless to protect her against her own insatiable vanity and egregious folly. He could only suffer silently with the full knowledge that this afternoon would widen the gulf that separated them.

At last the curtain dropped between the tumultuous audience and the three performers. Then wearily the broken-hearted husband rose from his corner and crept towards the entrance. He could endure no more.

CHAPTER XXI

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AT the foot of the staircase William Wilcox found Lord Fabro waiting for him. They turned together into Piccadilly.

'Well, Wilcox, Fanny did much better than I expected of her.'

'Yes, my lord,' replied William, deferentially.

'But, of course, she was before friends this afternoon. She will never succeed as an actress,' added Lord Fabro.

'No, my lord.'

'Except, perhaps, as a manageress. She might succeed that way.'

'Do you think she could, my lord?' asked the husband, with a shade of anxiety in his level voice.

'She might, as far as managing went, if she consented to take minor parts herself, and—'

'Yes, my lord.'

'—Could manage her own temper. Your wife, Wilcox, is a charming woman, and has first rate business qualities, but she has a beast of a temper.'

'Yes, my lord. Fanny is a little uncertain in her moods,' acquiesced William, meekly.

'Uncertain, by George! She is most certain to fly off in a hurricane on the shortest notice. I only wish I could be as certain of my horse winning the cup.'

William smiled gently, and said,—

'So do I, my lord, for I have something on Spitfire also.'

'Ah! well, I think your money is pretty safe. But as I was saying, you must persuade her to give up this theatrical fit and go with you to the Colonies. I can get you into a comfortable Government billet in Sydney where you and

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your wife will be received in the best society. The money which I was about to give for this hotel I shall give you instead. Come now, Wilcox, you know I have always been a good friend to you, and I have an interest in your welfare—and hers, as old servants.'

William shook his head sadly.

'I know how kind your lordship has been to me and Fanny. But do you think I can persuade her to do anything she does not wish herself?'

'You are her husband, hang it! Wilcox, and ought to show you are a man.'

'Ah! Yes, I am her husband.'

'Well, use your authority as one. Borrymore tells me she intends getting up a company. It is your duty to show her that this is pure folly. If she has any money she will waste it. If she gets into debt you must be the sufferer.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' answered William, dejectedly. 'But, my lord, after the reception she has just had, and which she appeared delighted with, do you think she will listen to my advice, or stop because it may hurt me?'

'Oh, nonsense, Wilcox! Tell her we were laughing at her—or, at least, at those guys she had with her.'

William looked at his lordship for an instant, then dropped his lids respectfully.

'Would your lordship like to tell Fanny that?'

Lord Fabro burst out laughing.

'No, by George! Candidly, my courage is not equal to such a piece of daring. But you are her husband, you know.'

'Yes, my lord, I am her husband, and therefore not brave enough either.'

'Well, tell her my offer; that may tempt her.'

'Yes, my lord, I'll place your kind offer before her next time I see Fanny.'

William respectfully refused the refreshment which his ex-master offered, and then they parted, Lord Fabro returning to the performance and William walking in the direction of his club.

His successor was to come that afternoon, and William was expected to be on the spot and initiate the new waiter

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into his duties, otherwise his own servitude was over. That night he would be at liberty to decide either to become a landlord or else think about Australia.

He was at present not thinking upon either as he walked slowly along Piccadilly, with his looks fixed on the pavement. It was his wife who occupied his pensive thoughts.

He had first fallen in love with her when she was maid to Lady Fabro. Then she used to walk out with him and accept his presents. She had always been ambitious, but in those days a good hotel had been the height of her ambition. She was romantic also, and devoured society novels, while her temper was even then a bit uncertain, as he had said.

He remembered her quarrel with Lady Fabro, with the account she gave of it. It had not been true, for it was she who provoked the quarrel and forced her indulgent mistress to dismiss her. He knew that now, and the real cause of her unreason, although, as yet, Lady Fabro did not.

She went to London to look for another situation, and found one in a fashionable dressmaker's. This she had written to him and he believed, dolt that he was. Now, however, he knew that she need not have deceived him, for he would have married her whatever she had been. He knew this now, although perhaps it was better that he had been deceived for a little while.

Then she wrote to him and said that an uncle in America had died and left her some money. Two thousand pounds was the amount of that legacy. In the same letter she asked him to give up his situation and marry her. She had enough now to start the hotel, with the money he had himself saved.

He did as she desired, and for a few weeks lived in a fool's paradise. Not that she was ever affectionate, but he thought her an honest woman, and he was satisfied with small mercies. It was in a fit of temper, and while he was negotiating about a hotel, that she told him the truth—told it shamelessly and brutally. Ah, well! he had swallowed that bitter pill and condoned the past. She was his wife, and he loved her; she was his tyrant, and

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he consented to be her abject slave. Love makes men as well as women bolt a great many disagreeable medicines.

But he had not touched her money—on this point he had remained firm. Neither did he take that hotel. He went and found a situation for himself at the club in spite of her virulent abuse. He also divided his salary and left the half on her dressing-table each time he received it, although she mocked at his most inadequate contribution towards household expenses. He knew perfectly well that it did not pay for her stockings and gloves, but it somehow kept alive one spark of what he once had tried to be—a man. It was a poor luxury, yet it consoled him just a little.

He never interfered with her, nor made any remonstrance. Whenever he quitted her presence, sick at heart and purposeless, he thought he had strength to stay away altogether. But the next free night he found himself walking towards Villa Heloise, trusting feebly that she might be in an amiable mood. He was always disappointed. He always crept out of her bedroom sick at heart and hopeless.

He had reached this stage of his dreary reminiscences when he suddenly experienced a sharp twinge of neuralgia; then he recollected that he had in his pocket his empty chloral bottle. He had put it there to get it filled, and the chemist's shop was close at hand. Without his customary sleeping-draught he would have a night of torment. Turning aside he entered the shop, and gave it without a word to the assistant. This man knew his customer and what he wanted. While it was being filled, William pensively gazed at the contents in the glass-case.

After this he went straight to his club, and as it was yet too early for him to go on duty, he passed upstairs to his bedroom. This was a small attic under the slates.

Placing his sleeping-medicine on the drawers' top, he opened a drawer where he kept his bank and cheque-books and notepaper. He was a methodical young man, and knew exactly what money he had in the bank. Getting quietly down on the edge of the bed he wrote out two cheques, each one representing half of all he possessed.

The one cheque he made payable to his mother, and

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the other to Mrs Hart-Beachcomber. His thin lip curled a little as he wrote the name—not with sufficient curl to be called a sneer, only a slight spasm of pain and pity.

‘I expect Fanny will mock at this miserable legacy,’ he murmured, as he looked dolefully at the second cheque he had written out. ‘It isn’t much to expect a kind thought for from the like of her. But two hundred and fifty will go a long way to console my poor old mother for my loss after I am gone.’

As he had done in the order of the cheques, so he wrote the notes which were to go with them—the first to his mother, the last to his wife. They were as follows:—

‘DEAR MOTHER,—I am leaving this place and mean to go abroad, therefore don’t be uneasy if you do not hear from me for a bit. I hope to see you by-and-by. Fanny sends her best love, and hopes that you will excuse her writing, as she is busy packing and getting things ready. She is still the same loving, little, true-hearted girl that she always was, and we are very comfortable and happy together. To let you know that our affairs are going all right, Fanny asks me to enclose this cheque, which may be useful to you, as we have plenty and can easily spare it. Please cash this cheque at once and send your reply to me, to be left till called for at the General Post-Office, Sydney, Australia. That will be sure to reach me all right. God bless you, dear mother. I am sorry not to be able to say good-bye to you.—Your loving son, WILLIAM.’

The second epistle ran:—

‘DEAR WIFE,—I am going to leave you, as I think this will be better for both of us. You need not be any longer frightened that I will disgrace you, as I sha’n’t bother you any more. I enclose a cheque for two hundred and fifty pounds, which is all that I can spare. It is not much, but perhaps you may find it useful. Try to think kindly about me, for I have always loved you truly and wished to make you happy. Forgive me also for leaving you so suddenly, but I think it the best service I can do you. Cash this

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cheque at once, and don't trouble any more about your affectionate husband.

WILLIAM.

He sealed and directed these letters. Then, leaving them on the bed, he went over to the drawer and took from it every scrap of writing that was there and made them into a bundle, with his bank and cheque-books included. Then he poured some water into the basin and washed his hands and face, after which he changed the clothes he was wearing for his club livery. He did all this methodically and listlessly, his face betraying no emotion.

When he was dressed for duty he put the two letters into his pocket, and taking the small bundle in his hand he walked down the servants' staircase to the kitchen, where the chef and cook were at present engaged preparing dinner.

'May I burn some rubbish, chef?' he asked meekly, as he approached the fireplace.

'Certainly, William. Shove it into the stove. You are about finished here, ain't you?'

'Yes, I finish to-night.'

'Well, I'm going to make a bit of supper specially for you, therefore don't forget to come to it after you have posted the new fellow up to his work.'

'Thank you, Ferdinand, I shall not forget. I'll stand the lush, of course.'

'No. I have spoken to the chief, and he has contributed the tippie for this little private farewell, so don't trouble about anything. Your share will be a song.'

William smiled faintly, and after watching his bundle consume he went about his duty.

While he waited at the table beside his successor, helping and directing him, he heard Arnold Kirklock, who was dining, give a humorous account of the afternoon performance to the other members. As Arnold ridiculed the reciter and described the scarecrow sisters, amid loud guffaws, William listened with grey and sphinx-like composure. His jaws, which the neuralgia was stinging, twitched slightly, however, when Arnold spoke freely about the character of Mrs Hart-Beachcomber, but this was all the emotion he displayed as he listened gravely and moved behind the

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diners decorously. He knew that Arnold was only telling the truth, and his place was that of a mute.

He waited during the two hours allowed for dinner to be served, then going to his chief he asked permission to post a letter.

'All right, William. I think we can dispense with you altogether now. Take your account to the secretary and he will square up. I'll see you at supper.'

William reached the post-office in time to get his letters registered. As he left the office he tore up the receipts and flung the pieces away. He was now at perfect liberty to do as he liked. No one at the club knew anything about his private life. There he was looked upon as a single man.

Before changing his livery for mufti he handed his account to the secretary of the club and received gold for his past month's services. Then he went to his attic and changed himself for supper. Although so undemonstrative, he was well liked and respected by his fellow-servants, and they were sorry to lose him. His health was drunk repeatedly and flowery speeches made in his honour, to which he replied shyly and briefly. Then he sang his one song, 'The Fine Old English Gentleman,' in a thin but sweet voice, which was received with loud applause. He merely tasted the rare wines that had been drawn in his honour—they were the best the club could produce—and then, with the companion-waiter who shared his attic, he went upstairs to bed.

'That 'orrible neuralgia at you again, Bill?' said his chamber-mate when he saw William uncork the bottle and lift up his measuring-glass.

'Yes, Peter. It is rather bad to-night.'

'Be careful with that chloral, William. You take it too often of late.'

'I'm going to stop it soon and try something else for a cure,' replied William, turning his face to the gas and his back on his friend.

He swallowed his sleeping-draught as he said this, then he recorked the bottle and stretched himself on the bed without undressing.

'You'll douce the glim, William, when you are ready?'

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‘Yes, I’ll see to that. Good-night, old fellow.’

‘Good-night,’ drowsily murmured the tired waiter as he turned about and fell asleep.

Hyacinthine was sitting up in bed the next morning with a pile of crushed newspapers beside her when Delphine brought in her letters. She was in a diabolical temper, for there was not a line in any of these papers about her matinee. The letters, however, consoled her somewhat, for they were brimming with gross flattery.

William’s letter she left to the last, as she had recognised his handwriting on the envelope. The fact that it was a registered letter alone saved it from being tossed aside unopened.

At last she took it up and tore it asunder impatiently, then seeing the cheque inside she glanced both over rapidly.

‘Gloria in Excelsis, Delphine!’ she cried gleefully to her maid, waving the cheque in the air. ‘Here is some satisfactory news. My beast has taken himself off at last.’

‘The master, madam?’

‘No, my wretched husband. He has gone away for good and left me at liberty, and a happy riddance too. Get my bath ready, girl, for I must go to the bank.’

As soon as she was dressed Hyacinthine drove to her husband’s bank and cashed the cheque. After this she called on Artemus Borrymore at his office and abused him for not managing the press better. Beyond wondering how William had saved so big a sum, she did not waste another thought upon her husband. It was a full week after this before she knew herself to be a widow. Arnold Kirklock mentioned casually one evening, when dining with her, that one of his club waiters had died suddenly from an overdose of chloral and been buried quietly. Then Hyacinthine inquired carelessly his name, and if he had left any property.

‘No. Sufficient money had been found to bury him decently with what he had, and by the sale of his wardrobe. No one knew anything about him except his name—William Wilcox. He was a decent fellow, but reticent, and had not

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left any correspondence whereby his relatives could be traced.'

Hyacinthine listened quietly, then she changed the conversation to a topic more cheerful. She was free to make another alteration in her name, and she began to calculate if it might not be possible to change it into Kirklock. Poor William Wilcox the waiter had quietly blanked himself out and left not a single trace behind.

CHAPTER XXII

THE HIGHER LIFE

THAT momentous matinee was productive of other interesting results besides the freeing of Hyacinthine from her marital bondage. If her execrable acting had proved the last straw on the burden of her unfortunate husband's miserable existence, it had also been the means of introducing Arnold Kirklock to a person who was destined to exercise some considerable influence on his life.

But for the matinee he might never have become on intimate terms with Lord Fabro, and never have met the youngest daughter of his lordship, the Hon. Miss Hilda Gresham.

The evil influence which Mrs Hart-Beachcomber exercised on people was far-reaching. It extended past her own actions and intentions, and continued spreading in directions far beyond her control and supervision.

While her husband was alive to check her vaulting ambition somewhat, it had not been of any consequence to her whether Lord Fabro and Arnold became confidential friends or not. She had invited them both to her matinee without considering that they might become acquainted. She had not introduced them to each other, for, like money-lenders with their clients, she preferred keeping her friends wide apart. But without thinking or caring for consequences, she had introduced them both to her dramatic agent, Artemus Borrymore. That genial gentleman became the connecting link between these two lives formerly separate.

Of course there was nothing to prevent Lord Fabro and Arnold from knowing each other before or after this except accident. They both belonged to the same exclusive society,

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and had crossed each other dozens of times at receptions and other fashionable gatherings. But as they represented different epochs of life, Lord Fabro having quitted school and college before Arnold was born, it is just possible that they might have remained strangers but for Artemus Borrymore and Mrs Hart-Beachcomber's matinee.

The grotesque humour of the situation banished all formality and restraint. They clinked glasses at the bar, and as dogs begin an acquaintanceship by touching noses, the one obliged the other with a light for the cigarette. When cigarettes approach and mingle ashes in that ardent salute, they are apt to produce the same effect as a first kiss between women. They make the smokers wondrously familiar.

Lord Fabro, catching Arnold's name, remembered some Kirklocks who were distantly connected with his own family; they were also relatives of Arnold. In this manner, before they had reached half-way through their cigarettes, they discovered that they were far-off cousins or something of that kind. Then Lord Fabro, mentally tracing the pedigree, became conscious that the Kirklocks represented by Arnold's branch were most substantial and respectable people.

Lord Fabro had four daughters still on his hands. Arnold was unmarried and an eligible young gentleman. By the time his lordship finished his cigarette Arnold became an object of interest to him. He returned to the hall leaning on the arm of the younger man, and for the rest of the performance they remained and laughed in company. Cards were exchanged and an invitation for dinner given by Lord Fabro and accepted by Arnold. Then the intimacy began, and the Hon. Hilda and her sisters were introduced.

With the other sisters, who were all graceful and highly-trained young ladies, we have nothing to do, as Arnold passed them over and flung his handkerchief to Hilda. She was nineteen, golden-haired, and of sylph-like proportions—one of Belgravia's sunniest and most accomplished daughters. Before Arnold had been many times in her company, the lukewarm sentiment which he had experienced for Beatrice Gray became transferred to this second, and, as his mother would have said, decidedly more suitable partner. There

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were no barriers here to keep him irresolute in his pursuit. As the son-in-law of Lord Fabro he would gain distinguishment, and as Hilda had a good settlement, a comfortable establishment, it was so far to him a lucky matinee.

He had dined with Lord and Lady Fabro, and met Hilda twice before that evening when he informed Mrs Hart-Beathcomber about her widowed condition without being in the least aware of the glad tidings he had given her. And she was far too crafty to let him know just yet. Experience had proved to Hyacinthine that gentlemen do not usually hail with unmixed delight the news that the lady with whom they have been playing at love has gained her liberty. Young gentlemen are apt to fight shy of widows, although they may be reckless enough in their attentions to married women.

She felt that she must act circumspectly if she hoped to snare this fly. The rôle of Lucretia was no longer available in her case, therefore only one method remained, which was the one most consistent with her character and previous dealings with mankind—she would reserve for the present the knowledge which he had unconsciously imparted to her from him and everyone. Meantime she would lure him on to commit himself with letters which would place him in her power. Endearing missives had already passed between them which, while her husband was to the fore, were useless, since he would not be a blackmailer. Now, however, with these and a few other unwary answers to artfully-worded letters from her, and the mesh would be round him. If she failed in winning him fairly, she might terrorise him by threats of a breach of promise, and at the worst force him to purchase his freedom at a heavy price.

Her company was now formed, and they were busy rehearsing a new drama which she had purchased the rights to produce. A few days more and they must begin their tour. This separation would give her the chance she wanted—to keep up a correspondence.

If Lord Fabro had tried to persuade her to relinquish the stage, Arnold gave her quite the contrary advice. He wished to end the wearisome intrigue, particularly now when he was meditating on arranging his future on different

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lines. This tour, therefore, appeared to be the best and least troublesome method of breaking it off. He was not conceited enough to think that she would keep faithful to him. She would be sure to become interested very speedily in someone else, then she would give him the cold shoulder. According to his usual way of facing difficulties, he was sure that circumstances would arrange themselves if he left them alone.

‘This will be our route, Arnold, and our stopping-places. You must run down and see me sometimes, after we get into smooth working trim.’

‘Oh, yes, of course, of course, Hyacinthine. We will have to be careful in the country, you know, dear, but I’ll find a chance now and again to visit you when your husband isn’t acting dragon. I suppose he will also be with you at odd times?’

She had informed him that Mr Hart-Beachcomber was a company promoter, and often absent from England.

‘My hubby has gone to make his fortune at Klondyke at present,’ she replied merrily, ‘therefore you need be under no apprehensions concerning his movements. Indeed, we had better leave that as a tabooed subject after this—until he comes back, at anyrate.’

‘All right, Hyacinthine. I have no eager desire for his return, and am quite agreeable to defer an introduction to him till the Day of Judgment, when I suppose we shall have to meet.’

Hyacinthine looked at him and was about to laugh, when she suddenly remembered that he might be her future husband, and she ought to show him the serious side of her disposition. She therefore became sweetly and tenderly sedate.

‘I do not like to hear jests on religious subjects, Arnold, dearest. I am aware you men say things carelessly, and without intending any serious meaning, but this hurts me more than you can imagine.’

She brought her fingers together, and bent on him an angelic expression of chastened reproach. Arnold at once apologised for his lack of reverence.

‘I know you may think me silly, nay, even hypocritical,

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Arnold, but I cannot help my aspirations towards pure and sacred ideals. I was brought up to love them by good, religious parents, and they cling to me in spite of my foolish weaknesses. Love may lead me at times from my pure ideals, but, oh! how I adore them. Forgive me, Arnold, and pray don't notice these tears.'

'By Jove, if she could only act as well on the stage as she does off it, there would be some chance for her,' thought Arnold, as he watched her brimming eyes uplifted for a moment before she hid them with her handkerchief.

'I am better now,' she said cheerfully, after a pause, during which Arnold had been playing with his fruit-knife. 'But, Arnold, you have put serious thoughts into my head, and I wish you to do me a favour. Will you, dearest?'

'Anything in reason, Hyacinthine.'

'I want you to leave me now to myself. I do not care for the theatre to-night. I wish to sit by myself and think what I might have been had my husband not been such a gross, worldly and money-loving man. I was such a child when he married me—such an innocent, ignorant, trusting child—that a good man could have led me to any height of holiness and truth. Ah!' she cried, with a shake of her shoulders and the nasal accent she always used when aiming at pathos, 'but enough of this weakness and regret. You will indulge me, dearest, and leave me to my own thoughts to-night. Go to your club, and try to bear with me for breaking my promise and disappointing you.'

'Certainly, Hyacinthine, if you would rather be alone I shall go at once,' said Arnold, rising from the table, outwardly regretfully, but inwardly joyful at escaping the trying ordeal of a long evening in her company.

'You *are* good, Arnold.' Good, true and kind, as this action proves. It is so easy to yield to a temptation, so easy to be kind when it is a pleasure to be kind, but oh, so—so difficult to make a sacrifice to prove devotion. I do believe, in spite of your sceptical words, that you are a noble, religious man at heart, and, had it been my fate to have met you sooner, that you would have led me upwards.'

Arnold laughed as he patted the dimples in her creamy

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cheeks. She was standing close to him and had placed her hands on his shoulders as if to look at him better. Her breath—milky in its aroma, even though she had been eating so lately, for she had superb physical health—wafted into his nostrils like the breath of a cow. Arnold reached over and kissed her.

‘I doubt if I would have done much better than your husband, Hyacinthine,’ he replied. ‘You are far too good for grovelling animals like us, Hyacinthine. You ought to mount a halo and a pair of wings. There, I am at it again. Don’t be too hard on me, but let me leave you to your pious meditations.’

‘Good-night, Arnold. Come and see me before I depart,’ she said sweetly and gravely.

‘Depend upon me doing that.’

‘And you will write to me, say once a week at least.’

‘Yes, dearest ; and give you all the news.’

‘About yourself, remember. I shall not care to hear about anything else.’

‘Well, yes. I shall be as egotistical as you wish me to be.’

‘Good-night, good-night. “Parting is such sweet sorrow, that I could say good-night till it be morrow.”’

It was a pity that Hyacinthine thought upon these lines at that moment, and repeated them in her best stage manner—that is, through her nose. Arnold, in spite of his experience and unbelief, had felt a little touched at her former sentiment ; but this couplet brought the matinee rather too vividly before his mind. He felt he must make his escape or else be guilty of the unpardonable offence of laughing.

He therefore caught her yielding form to his breast, and kissed her once again on her answering lips ; then he released her quickly and turned toward the door.

‘Go, Arnold, before I regret sending you away.’

He went rapidly, leaving her leaning against the mantel-shelf and looking after him with softened eyes. Snatching his hat and overcoat from the stand he crammed them on as he ran out of the front door.

‘I wonder how much of that was genuine,’ he muttered

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as he walked towards the cab rank. 'She can do it uncommonly natural in private, considering what a failure she makes in public.'

He misjudged Hyacinthine in thinking it all acting on her part, for at that moment she was standing entranced with her own purity and goodness, and ready to weep again at the brutal depravity of men. She felt herself to be everything she had described as her natural yearnings; while at the same time she was satisfied that she had made the right impression, and almost sure of trapping him through her future letters.

CHAPTER XXIII

HYACINTHINE GOES ON TOUR

ARTEMUS BORRYMORE plunged gaily into his company forming, now that he was financially backed. The treasury is the greatest difficulty generally in such cases, for talent is easily enough picked up in mighty, modern Babylon.

The agent was able to command the services of enough properly-trained actors and actresses to have crowded fifty travelling companies if he had required them. As for amateurs who were thirsting for engagements, even at no salary, and who thought themselves better actors than Irvine, Tree and Alexander, and more fascinating actresses than Miss Ellen Terry, Bernhardt or Mrs Patrick Campbell, they were like locusts filling up a denuded land.

It was his occupation to pocket fees and enter addresses into his reference books, to receive hungry-eyed men and importunate women of acknowledged abilities into his den and give them promises which he had but faint hopes of fulfilling. These clients knew, from bitter and long experience, how small were the prospects of engagements which he held, and how futile it was to hope for more than a temporary alleviation of their daily miseries.

A solitary matinee or trial performance most likely with intervals of months stretching between. Yet they were able to take any part, with credit, from lead to manservant. They quite exonerated Artemus when he passed over their heads to push in a novice, for he had to face the rates and taxes as well as themselves. They were ready to swallow dignity and pride and accept subordinate parts and suffer 'the whips and scorns of time, the insolence of office and the spurns, that patient merit of the unworthy takes' in

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order to keep the pot boiling. They were professionals, who had endured more privations and toiled harder to master their craft than would have made them independent in any other walk in life. Most of them were accomplished women and men—nearly all of them actors and actresses to be depended upon with safety for general utility work.

But they had no delusions left. They were all aware that their only chance of being able to exist was by taking inferior engagements and eating humble pie in the company of such task-mistresses as Hyacinthine Hart-Beachcomber. They groaned or cursed privately to have to submit to this degradation. They perspired with professional shame to be connected with such dreadful marplots, yet necessity forced them to swallow the leek and be thankful for the post.

Artemus Borrymore acted with rare discretion in making his selection from this vast army of unfortunate capables. He had his own interests first to consult, with which was inseparably blended the interest of the public, for he must please them as far as possible in view of his future appeals. It would not do to cart a batch of unfledged novices round the country, even to please the lame bird who paid. The tour must not be a dead failure or his name would be entirely ruined.

He had likewise the temper and tastes of his most difficult patroness to cater for, and, as far as possible, get her to agree with his own and the interests of the great public. Fortunately Hyacinthine belonged to a very ordinary type of moneyed actress-manageresses; the kind of oof-birds that had contributed towards the household expenses of the Borrymores throughout the course of his long and checkered career. Many of these vain pigeons had perched in his cage before this capture; some escaping with the loss of a few feathers, some remaining until they were plucked bare, so that he knew exactly how to manage them.

The women would be the main difficulty, and all who had the slightest pretensions to good looks must be carefully excluded. Temperaments also had to be considered, and only the meek and diplomatic could be thought of, for, as

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Mrs Hart-Beachcomber was to be mistress, she must have the entire monopoly of caprice and temper. Knowing her as he did, Artemus looked forward to having a busy time as peacemaker on that tour, even with the most patient serf on his list.

With the actors the case was different ; he must pick out young, agreeable and handsome men, unmarried when possible, for their own sakes. Hyacinthine resembled Queen Bess in this respect even more than she did Queen Mary.

Artemus had a great number of handsome, young and agreeable gentlemen on his books, all open to engagements, and not at all particular what parts they got to play ; but, as a rule, the more charming they were in themselves the less they were to be depended upon as actors to keep up his reputation. Pretty young men were usually 'sticks,' and he could not afford to have more than one dead stump in his company.

He spent a long and harassing day inside his office, looking over his address books for suitable names. He must have one man to play the leading parts, so as to cover, as far as possible, the shortcomings of the leading lady, Mrs Hart-Beachcomber.

There were several quite capable of doing this to perfection, but they were past their bloom—all stale and respectable family men, whose appearance and cynicism would be sure to offend the patroness. Before men become really good actors youth has left them, while they have become handicapped with responsibilities, which render them indifferent to flirtation—that is, the actors who were forced to apply to Mr Borrymore for engagements. It was with great reluctance that he passed over several men, whose abilities he respected and whose services he would fain have secured, but the sacrifice had to be made.

He then fixed on the most capable and tractable of the handsome and gentlemanly set, with the most homely, talented and docile female performers. As most of the clients were the wives of actors and personal friends, this choice was all the more agreeable to him, since he was thus able to do them a service by employing their partners if he could not give them a chance.

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He then submitted his list to Hyacinthine, and made appointments so that she could decide for herself. The result was satisfactory. Hyacinthine thought both ladies and gentlemen were charming. They listened appreciatively to her recitations, and extolled her genius and personal beauty with respectful and adroit expressions. Also, when she invited them to a choice supper at Romano's, their unanimous enthusiasm and predictions of success were deliciously soothing. Artemus had posted them all up privately as to how they were to treat their hostess, and they played their parts gravely, as people play who have a heavy stake to risk.

Hyacinthine patronised her future subjects right royally, and they abased themselves as to a queen.

But they insisted on signed agreements and substantial salaries, as Artemus had done for himself. Knowing what trials and tribulations were in store for them, the agent yielded to their demands good-naturedly. The better they were paid the higher commission he received for placing them, so that he could not grumble. Hyacinthine did the complaining, as she had to do the paying; but, at last, all was happily arranged, and they were ready for the road, a remarkably rollicking and happy family.

That is to say at the beginning, for Hyacinthine was always very generous and sweet with her subjects while the novelty lasted and the praise was lavish and fresh.

Artemus Borrymore had persuaded her to include in her Shakespearian and classical repertoire a modern and original melodrama that he had secured, or rather caused to be written expressly for her.

This drama was constructed especially to draw country audiences, crammed with incident, sensationalism and weepy fustian; a persecuted heroine who gets badly knocked about yet manages to stick to her extensive and elaborate wardrobe despite the fiendish villainy that environs her. This was Hyacinthine's part, which was designed to enable her to hold the stage through most of the scenes, and give her emotions full rope; indeed, the more outrageously she acted the more consistent she would be to her assumed character. It was a dressy play, with fashionably-costumed heroes and ruffians

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and quick changes. The scenery consisted of a drawing-room, a garden and a divorce court.

'Delia's Divorce' it was called — a realistic, modern drama. Hyacinthine had a high part; the noble hero and the heavy villain had each fairly good business, also a wicked adventuress showed up at critical moments to be hooted, but the other characters were all very subordinate parts, except the comic male and female.

This was the type of plays generally written for paying amateurs and gleaned from the cheap novelettes. It had cost Artemus five pounds to purchase it outright from the needy dramatist, but he charged fifty pounds down, and reserved a sixth part of the receipts as royalties for it. It was, therefore, to his interest to have it played as often as possible.

In ordinary business matters Hyacinthine was by no means a fool, as Artemus had already discovered. Therefore he had to look strictly after the outside business of the stage, and submit each item to her scrutiny. In the matter of his commission and other legitimate profits it was impossible for her to check him; but in other matters he soon discovered that she was not easily hoodwinked. She was active, energetic and suspicious; therefore he was forced to walk wary and work hard for his salary.

Financially, the tour was more successful than might have been expected. The company was a sound one, so that when the names were announced on the bills the country public anticipated a tolerable performance, and paid their money freely enough. Supported as she was also, Hyacinthine could hardly fail to learn a little of the technicality of the profession. Her Shakespearian representations were always ghastly affairs, as far as she was concerned, but her audiences were not critical; and if Juliet and Desdemona failed to pass muster, Romeo, Othello and Iago, etc., generally saved the tragedies from developing into farces.

Wild scenes, however, occurred in the private course of that company's progress through the country, which kept the daily life of Artemus Borrymore from getting monotonous. Hardly a week passed without one of the subjects becoming rebellious and refusing to submit any longer to the violence and tyranny of Mrs Hart-Beachcomber,

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Artemus did not mind so much when the subject turned rebel, as he could supply their loss without much delay. But when Hyacinthine dismissed someone she had become jealous of, and refused to recompense them for the broken engagement, then trouble fell on the agent, and his fate was not an enviable one. Before they had gone over England, Scotland and Ireland, Hyacinthine had changed her company entirely several times, and established for herself and her agent a most unenviable reputation. Their progress through the provinces was blazed with county court actions, in which Hyacinthine was invariably the loser.

These litigations, along with her heavy expenses, devoured her capital, in spite of the fair profits which they drew at many towns. The money she had received from Lord Fabro had vanished, and Hyacinthine began at last to see that a theatrical life was not quite the couch of roses she had imagined it to be.

But her confidence in her own gifts was not in the least lessened, nor was her temper in any way improved by her experience. She felt she was now a fully-fledged actress, and her misfortunes she laid on any shoulder but her own. She had been betrayed by a set of traitors, but, like the confirmed gambler, she was more than ever resolved to play. This was her condition when, with her agent and a most inadequate company, she arrived at Ramsgate on the day Beatrice Gray had seen her with Arnold.

It was not the pursuit of pleasure which had brought Arnold Kirklock on this day, but a stern command which he dared not disobey.

Hyacinthine had played her game adroitly with this foolish young man, and lured from him the letters necessary for her purpose. He knew now that she had been a widow for the past twelve months, and that she had it in her power to make things very unpleasant for him. He had come, therefore, to put some money into this quicksand of a company in order to save himself from being dragged into the breach of promise court.

They had just finished their conclave at the hotel, when Arnold had promised to pay a good round sum down, and finance the company for another twelve months, in return for

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his freedom—i.e., his compromising letters. Hyacinthine had learnt about his engagement to the Hon. Hilda Gresham and turned the screw.

They had arranged everything, however, satisfactorily. Hyacinthine was again in funds and amiable, and Arnold held his expensive love-letters in his inner breast-pocket, and was making himself agreeable to his blackmailing friend before returning to the lady whom he was engaged to marry.

Then engaged in their own pleasant fancies, and keeping up a show of friendliness, they passed the woman clutching the rail, without being aware of her proximity.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE ENGAGEMENT

THE moment Arnold Kirklock and Mrs Hart-Beachcomber passed, Beatrice Gray became ashamed of her unworthy emotion. She felt that she had no cause to fear meeting that pair who had wronged her in the past. If anyone should shrink, Arnold was the one, and perhaps Hyacinthine. The injured one had been entirely free from blame.

Yet if that day's ceremony availed at all, and the past was completely wiped out, Beatrice stood no longer in the position of the injured. She had been wronged, but the Church had rectified that injury. She had been stained, but the Church had washed her clean. She was no longer in the position to blame or accuse any more than the one who has had his stolen property restored.

Naturally, after what she had seen and heard, Arnold might be expected to appear at the side of the woman who had taken him from her. Perhaps she was now his lawful wife. Hyacinthine, in her former intimacy with Beatrice, had never once mentioned Mr Hart-Beachcomber; therefore, for all Beatrice knew, she might have been a widow then, and Mrs Kirklock now.

In the theatrical world people use stage names. Beatrice had chosen Helen Clevedon as her *nom de guerre*. Hyacinthine was known on the bills as Rosalind de Vere; therefore, although she knew of the 'De Vere Company,' it did not occur to her to associate Hyacinthine with this unpopular manageress.

As it chanced, she had answered an advertisement of Artemus Borrymore for a utility actress, as the demand seemed to meet her present position exactly.

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Artemus wanted a beginner of promise, who desired experience in a travelling company. Good parts were promised to one found suitable, with terms to be arranged on approval. To this extremity Artemus had now been reduced by the cantankerous disposition of Hyacinthine, who had entirely used up his list of professional clients.

Beatrice, in her applications, quoted her friend and instructress, and she was now waiting the reply. She had reached that period of her theatrical career when a provincial tour would enable her to face London afterwards. It was on the advice of Miss Martha Playfair that she ventured upon this application, as she was now able to take very good parts, and this promised her the opportunity she wanted. As yet, however, she did not know who the advertiser was.

As soon as Arnold and Mrs Hart-Beachcomber had gone out of sight, Beatrice left the esplanade and returned to her lodgings. Here she passed the afternoon with her child, being resolved to stay indoors and avoid meeting these visitors again. She had just finished tea when the post brought her the answer she expected, asking her to call upon Mr Borrymore at his hotel as soon as convenient. The name of Miss Playfair had been sufficient for him as a voucher for her respectability and abilities. Beatrice now learnt that the De Vere Company, at present in Ramsgate, was the one she had applied to join.

Being disengaged that night, Beatrice resolved to call at once and see the agent. She wished also to judge the other performers before finally committing herself. As yet she had no idea and no presentiment of who she was to meet.

It was close on eight o'clock when she called at the hotel, to find that Artemus had gone to the Town Hall. Thither she followed him, and sent in her professional card by one of the attendants.

Artemus hastened to meet her as soon as he received her card, but as he was particularly busy at the moment, he showed her into one of the select seats, promising to take her behind the scenes between the acts. When she took her seat the orchestra were playing the overture.

The drama for the night was 'Delia's Divorce,' and

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Beatrice waited with some curiosity for the curtain to rise, so that she might judge what to expect.

As she looked round the hall she was relieved not to see Arnold nor his companion. She had now recovered her presence of mind and meant to ignore him if she ever met him face to face, yet she was pleased to escape the ordeal. When she went to London, as she was resolved to do as soon as she could, she expected they would meet sometime. It therefore did not really matter when this meeting happened.

The house was fairly full, and it pleased her also to see that the programmes were artistically got up and delicately perfumed. This proved at least that the company aimed at a certain refinement, which augured well for the performance. Artemus also had treated her in a deferential and courteous manner, while he wore an immaculate shirt-front and a flourishing-looking dress-suit—signs that appealed to her feminine instincts as tokens of respectability.

The drama commenced quietly. The stage setting was on a sumptuous scale, and the actors accomplished and appropriately dressed in well-made, unworn clothes. This soothed Beatrice greatly as it proved to her that she was not going to join a rag-tag, seedy company. The adventuress and the gentlemanly villain opened the piece, and they acted their parts perfectly, without any bombast. The injured heroine had yet to come—the manageress, Rosalind de Vere.

Beatrice was just settling herself down with an easy mind for an evening's enjoyment, when Hyacinthine Hart-Beachcomber entered, magnificently costumed. Until she spoke, Beatrice looked at her with curiosity, but the moment the voice sounded she was recognised. Beatrice started with dismay, then glanced at her programme. The first words showed her that Rosalind de Vere and Mrs Hart-Beachcomber were identical.

At the unexpected surprise the young actress made a movement to rise, intending to leave the hall and forego all thought of an engagement. Then she sank down again, feeling that this would call attention to her. It would be better to wait till the act was over, then she could go quietly ;

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so she sat still, and watched critically the performance of this once detested rival.

In the next few moments all discomfort had left Beatrice, while a vague sense of pity began to possess her. She had long since got rid of any resentment for this woman. Indeed, she had learnt to be grateful for the service Hyacinthine had rendered her in the past.

Now her atrocious acting, the more pronounced amid that well-trained company, completed her cure.

There was no room for jealousy respecting the woman, while the actress only moved her to commiseration. It seemed pathetic that this woman should make such a spectacle of her utter incompetence. Beatrice could see that the actors and actresses were maliciously playing their best and quietest in order to show up Hyacinthine's faults the more glaringly. As she saw this she forgave freely all her past injuries.

When she had reached this stage of her reflections she thought next, Why should she back out of this engagement if Mrs Hart-Beachcomber would accept her services? She need not tell anything about her past, and even if Arnold was married to Hyacinthine, that could make no difference to her now. She was quite able to keep him in his proper place, and in this company there was room for her. It was a chance she might not have again quickly. Before the first act was over Beatrice resolved to stay and try her luck. She had not long to wait, for Mr Borrymore came to where she was sitting just after the scene had dropped, and requested her to accompany him to the dressing-room.

Beatrice was prepared for the coming interview, and Hyacinthine had also noticed her as she retired. Fortunately the pleasant mood which Arnold had left her in still continued. She therefore greeted the applicant effusively.

'You need not introduce Miss Clevedon. We are old, old friends, are we not, Miss Gray?'

Beatrice smiled and advanced quietly, submitting to the caress.

'I have no time to discuss business now, my dear child, but as soon as the play is over you must join me at supper,

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and then we shall go into it thoroughly. I am delighted to see you. And how did you like my acting?’

Beatrice murmured something inaudible, which the other accepted for praise.

‘Ah, yes. I noticed how surprised and delighted you were with my part, even with the wretched support I had. But I hope to alter all that presently. Now go round to the front, for you must not miss any of the second act. I am in it nearly all the time, and I am great there. But it is frightfully wearing, I assure you.’

Beatrice obediently returned to her seat and endured that and the two last acts with stoical fortitude. Artemus told her, as they went round together, that the adventuress was leaving them after the Ramsgate week was over. He asked her to study this actress carefully as this was the vacancy she would fill if she suited.

‘I have seen Miss Playfair to-day, and she recommends you highly as one of her most promising pupils. If, therefore, you feel equal to playing seconds, and agree with Mrs Hart-Beachcomber to-night, we may consider the matter settled.’

‘I have not met Mrs Hart-Beachcomber for some considerable time, and was rather surprised to find her as Miss de Vere and head of a company. Doubtless she is also astonished to find me in the same profession. Does her husband travel with her?’

‘Her husband died a twelvemonth ago at Klondyke.’

‘Indeed. I was not sure who it was at the time, but now I must have passed her this afternoon with a gentleman whom I used to know slightly.’

‘You mean Mr Kirklock?’

‘Yes, that was his name, now you recall it to me,’ answered Beatrice, calmly. She wanted to find out what their relations were, before she decided on her future movements. Since they were not yet married, perhaps they were only waiting for decent time of mourning to elapse before going through the ceremony.

‘Oh, yes,’ replied Artemus, easily. ‘We had Mr Kirklock with us this morning on a little matter of business, but he returned to London this afternoon. He is an old

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friend of the manageress, but, as with you, they have not met for a considerable time before to-day. He is engaged to one of the daughters of Lord Fabro.' Artemus added this piece of news in a careless tone as he left her at the side door.

Beatrice was satisfied. If Arnold was engaged to be married to another lady, the obstacles were removed which might have prevented her taking this opening. Mrs Beachcomber would not likely be jealous of her as far as he was concerned, while as to their singular friendship, it was no longer any concern of hers. She did not expect him to be true to any woman after her former experience of him, but she was sure that he would not trouble her again. She felt glad that their lives were so completely separated now.

After the performance she joined Hyacinthine in the dressing-room and went with her to the hotel. Mr Borrymore accompanied them. Beatrice was not afraid of the parts expected of her, although they were more important than she had yet been entrusted with. She had followed the actress closely, and she was already letter-perfect with many of the well-known parts which were mentioned to her. She was also a rapid study, and knew that with such a leader she need not be at all timid in playing up to her.

Hyacinthine was also delighted at getting Beatrice under her control at less than half the salary she was at present paying. She was, besides, in a fix to fill the place of the actress whom her vile temper was driving from her, and had made up her mind to try someone not too professional. Therefore, to the decided relief of Artemus, she consented to give Beatrice a trial, and fixed the next morning for a rehearsal. She was amiable enough to overlook the youth and beauty as disqualifying blemishes, for the present, at anyrate. So the supper passed off pleasantly, and Hyacinthine parted from Beatrice with many expressions of goodwill and patronage.

CHAPTER XXV

THE DÉBUT OF BEATRICE

It was hardly to be expected that Beatrice would succeed where so many had failed before. Only a Delphine could continue to serve under Mrs Hart-Beachcomber, and an Iduna remain her faithful devotee.

Beatrice had, however, no delusions respecting Hyacinthine to be reft from her. She entered upon her engagement with eyes wide open to all the elder lady's idiosyncracies, and prepared herself to have a most unpleasant time of it. She was not agreeably disappointed. Hyacinthine never acted for long unnaturally except when on the stage. Very early the cloven hoofs appeared, and then Beatrice had need of all her fortitude.

She had made up her mind to endure much for the sake of her art, and this was a chance not to be abandoned for such thorns as the exacting and capricious moods of a haridan could impose upon her. Her own youth, strength and fresh vitality were her overpowering and never-failing revenges on these rapidly-declining charms. The slimness and grace of her developing figure offered a constant reminder of her lost youth to the woman who was accumulating flesh so perceptibly.

The unfailing composure and even temper of Beatrice whipped Hyacinthine into madness. Her growing powers and keen wit acted like deadly insults to the obtuse victim of vanity. In a short time this mature coquette watched the peachy bloom and beauty of her youthful rival with despair, and her gathering powers with impotent fury. She raged, as she had never done before, at this assistant, who endured her jibes, sneers and virulent abuse with good-natured contempt.

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Beatrice would not be insulted nor driven from the company, no matter how viciously Hyacinthine tried her. She had made up her mind to succeed, and these were only some of the obstacles which she had anticipated finding in her rugged upward path.

The greatest sacrifice she made, however, was the leaving of little Mary behind her to the care of her landlady. Mrs Bracer, however, was warmly attached to her charge, who was a thriving child, so that the young mother left her behind with an easy mind. On the tour Beatrice devoted herself to hard work, and consoled herself for each fresh insult that she was gaining experience and advancing quickly in her art. When she was ready, and furnished with a good London engagement, she would leave this obnoxious woman, but not before, if she could possibly avoid an open rupture.

For the first two or three weeks, however, Hyacinthine was delighted to have the company of Beatrice. It suited her malice to place this talented but untried novice over the heads of the more experienced actresses, and she gloated to see them writhe when she extolled her abilities ostentatiously before them at rehearsal and between the acts.

Artemus Borrymore also was pleased to see this friendly attitude, for he soon became greatly interested in what he considered to be a rising star. The freshness, originality and keen intelligence of Beatrice all pointed to success, which meant kudos and more cash to him. In order to keep up the good feeling as long as possible, he adroitly deprecated the gifts and attractions of this member to Hyacinthine whenever he could. Her reserve he called lack of spirit, and while he deplored her want of go to the leader, he privately coached Beatrice whenever he had an opportunity. He told her to work on as she was doing, and keep as long as possible from exciting the jealousy of her pay-mistress. When the fault-finding and taunts began he did his utmost to smooth the troubled waters.

‘You are a sensible girl, Miss Clevedon ; just regard her as an irresponsible maniac and don’t mind her temper. You are getting on splendidly, and if you stick to your

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colours I am determined to try our fortune at some of the large towns.'

'Oh, she cannot offend me, Mr Borrymore,' replied Beatrice, with calm scorn. 'I know her right into the core, and you may depend upon me staying until she absolutely dismisses me.'

'I'll see that she doesn't do that before you have the prospect of a first-class engagement in London.'

Beatrice felt grateful to Artemus for his support, for she had a hard time both with Hyacinthine and the others, who were combined against her as an obnoxious outsider. She kept as much aloof from them as she possibly could, and went on her way quietly. It was not so difficult to ignore their spite as it was to keep at bay the attempted love-making of the leading man, and seem friendly all round.

Yet with the adroit help of Borrymore she managed pretty well. Indeed, when Hyacinthine fairly unmasked her batteries, Beatrice found herself in a more tolerable position, as the rest of the company forgot their own annoyance and gave her their united sympathy. They, like the agent, quite recognised her talents, and abhorred the ignorant upstart who so wantonly domineered over them.

At last, after several weary months of patient waiting and hard working, Beatrice got her opportunity—the chance of acting leading part in an important city, and before a critical audience.

It was in the month of November, and a week before the beginning of the pantomime season, that Artemus secured the Theatre Royal in Edinburgh, the most critical city in the United Kingdom. As it chanced, also, Hyacinthine had a violent attack of influenza which completely prostrated her, so that Beatrice was called upon to take her place, and another well-known actress sent for to supply the vacancy.

When Hyacinthine heard who the actress was who had been secured at the last moment, she was furious, for this was a person she particularly hated as one of the many who had derided her histrionic qualities in public. At first she ordered Artemus to countermand the commission, but

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when he told her this was impossible, as the time was too short to get another, she was forced to give way.

‘At any rate, Miss Brand sha’n’t be allowed to murder my parts. Let Beatrice do them till I am better. There is no acting in her, but she will at least behave herself decently on the stage, which this creature cannot.’

Artemus smiled as he replied discreetly, ‘Do you think, Hyacinthine, we can trust Miss Clevedon to play such parts as you have been accustomed to fill? You know Miss Brand has had more experience, and we must begin with some stock piece as she has no time to get up any part in “Delia’s Divorce”?’

‘Put on “Romeo and Juliet,” with Miss Brand as Nurse and Beatrice as Juliet. She will manage to walk through the part, and I hope to be well enough to act it properly before the week is out. It will make a contrast to *my* Juliet. There, don’t worry me any more at present, for I am nearly blind with pain.’

Hyacinthine made these arrangements to punish the actress who had offended her, and in the absolute certainty that Beatrice would fail. She had resolutely blinded herself to any merit in Beatrice beyond her looks, and for the moment forgot even these. The other actress filled her mind for the time with bitterness and spite. It was a most unfortunate attack she had, for she had been looking forward to this Edinburgh week with passionate desire.

A thrill of triumph passed over Beatrice when she learnt the decision of her tyrant, but she concealed this under an air of indifference. It was a keen disappointment to Miss Brand, yet the character of Nurse suited her better, for she was no longer young. Already she had heard favourable reports of the younger actress, so she swallowed the pill and accepted the subordinate part with a good grace.

The moment had arrived, with the place, which Beatrice had waited for so long, and striven so strenuously to reach. She had all the humility, yet hopeful confidence and ardour of the true artist. Every word of Juliet she knew by heart, and often in the nighttime had she spent hours studying to understand its deeper meanings and create some fresh rendering. Yet, she felt she was capable of presenting a

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new Juliet to the world, if her courage did not fail her at the critical hour.

She attended the hurried rehearsal, and afterwards spent the interval between that and the performance in solitude and prayer. If the Edinburgh critics praised her, then her upward course would be rapid and brilliant. It was a big reward if she succeeded that night. Years more of waiting and struggling if she failed. No wonder she felt awed and timorous as the ordeal neared.

It had not mattered to the ordinary playgoers the change of performers in the programme. Miss Rosalind de Vere was quite as unknown a personage as Miss Helen Clevedon.

But in modern Athens the announcement that an unknown actress was about to venture with this Shakespearean tragedy did stir their critical, chilly blood, and drew them in force to pronounce judgment. On this first night the house was crowded with an audience predisposed to condemn, yet ready also to be won to enthusiasm if the claimant was worthy of applause. There was no such feeling as English indulgence to be expected from these stern judges. Faults were never condoned, yet they were just if severe, and the trembling competitor knew that if he or she received their approval they could go anywhere.

The fates had been merciful to Hyacinthine when afflicting her with influenza at this period and letting a substitute face that keen-eyed, icy audience in her stead. She was better to be racked with pain and scorched with fever on that bed in the Princes Street hotel than to be roasted by these cynical Scotchmen. But she did not know this mercy in disguise, therefore she tossed about bewailing her hard fate.

'Courage, my dear,' said Artemus, kindly, to Beatrice, as she waited at the wing on her cue, as white almost as her costume. 'You are lovely, and look the character to perfection, and that is half the battle. If you once win the sympathy of this house, you will not want for enthusiasm. They will either take to you or hoot you at the first dozen lines, and I think they will take to you.'

'I shall strive to win their favour,' answered Beatrice, smiling faintly.

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‘What a blessing Hyacinthine is in bed to-night ! Edinburgh has been a nightmare to me for the past fortnight. There you are, child. Go on, and may the gods protect you.’

Her moment had come. Bracing up her courage, Beatrice, as Juliet, tripped on to the stage with all the lightness and grace of a young girl in answer to the nurse’s call. Once past the wings her timidity fell from her, and she forgot everything except her character. Her entrance was quiet and natural ; her exquisite voice controlled, as there was no need for her to exert herself in the first scene, and she had no desire to force applause.

Artemus watched her, with his heart almost standing still, as she cried, ‘Now, now, who calls?’ in the tones of a girl half-impatient. He drew a deep breath of relief, and put his eye to the hole in the front wing to watch the audience.

They were gazing with intent faces on the new Juliet, without a sign of emotion, and this set expression they kept up until she uttered the lines,—

‘I’ll look to like, if looking liking move :
But no more deep will I endart mine eye,
Than your consent gives strength to make it fly.’

Artemus heard the flexible voice utter the words without the slightest effort or exaggeration, and as he watched that sea of faces relax, and their hands raised to clap, he knew that Beatrice had made the desired impression. He was no longer afraid of the result.

‘You’ll do,’ he said shortly, as he patted her on the shoulder. ‘Keep that sort of thing up and the papers will be full of you to-morrow. Then, God help you with the sick woman,’ he added mentally, as he turned away to attend to other business.

It was an unqualified success. The Romeo, more than half in love with Beatrice, supported her excellently, and was, besides, a handsome young man, while the others rose to the occasion nobly.

The consequence was that at the end of the first act each member had to pass before the drop scene, while the house echoed with applause. This acted on their spirits like

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champagne. They had conquered Scotland, and felt that the world lay at their feet.

Beatrice was exalted as when she had risen from that baptism. She was filled with intense gratitude for the favour bestowed upon her, and for the rest of that evening she entered upon her part without a thought of the audience. Yet their loud enthusiasm, growing each act more decided, intoxicated her also. She had heard such hard things about the Scotch, but this only made her triumph the more convincing. To-night she loved her audience with a passionate fervour. At last the tragedy was over, and she stood strong, happy and excited amidst a throng of worshippers. Her days of struggle were over, and she had entered her kingdom.

‘You’ll have to leave us now, for Mrs Hart-Beachcomber will never forgive this victory,’ said Artemus, as he shook her hands warmly. ‘Don’t forget that I was your friend, my dear.’

‘I shall never forget you, nor this glorious night, my friend,’ answered Beatrice, with eyes swimming with grateful tears. Suddenly she remembered the woman who had treated her so badly, yet to whom she was indebted for this success.

‘Ah, poor Hyacinthine! I must go and nurse her to-night.’

‘Don’t, for God’s sake, or you’ll be down next,’ cried Artemus, alarmed. ‘She doesn’t deserve a single kind thought from you.’

‘Oh, yes, she does,’ cried Beatrice, firmly. ‘And I must go. I should never forgive myself if I neglected her after this.’

Artemus and the rest of the company remonstrated, but they had to let her follow her own impulse. Seeing that she was resolved, the agent went with her in a cab.

‘You must keep her in the dark about the result of this night. Don’t boast, or she will fly at you, or go raving mad. To-morrow, also, let us trust she will be too ill to look at a newspaper, for if she does you will not be allowed to play another night. Be most careful of yourself also, for it will never do if you get on the sick list.’

Beatrice promised the agent to attend to his directions, then they parted—she to nurse Hyacinthine, while he went to his hotel to entertain the critics.

CHAPTER XXVI

A NIGHT WITH HYACINTHINE

HYACINTHINE was very bad when Beatrice entered her presence, and the nurse at her wit's end in her vain attempts to manage her most fractious patient. Healthy people generally make fiendish invalids, and the prostrate tragedienne was no exception to this rule.

She was in the chill stage, having flung the bedclothes aside which the nurse had piled on her, and refused to take the medicine. Indeed, she had taken one of her reasonless fits of hatred toward this hired nurse, and would not allow her to go near her. She now lay with chattering teeth and glaring eyes, pouring out a volley of abuse on the doctor, the nurse and the hotel people, as being all in a conspiracy to murder her.

When she saw Beatrice enter, she beckoned her over eagerly, and screamed hoarsely,—

‘Dismiss that vile woman, Beatrice. She will kill me if she stays in this draughty room. The doctor, also, is a stupid ass. For God’s sake look after me! Oh, I am so cold—so cold.’

Beatrice instantly took possession of the case with her usual calm manner. She knew what to do exactly.

‘Keep quiet, my dear, and I’ll make you all right presently.’

She placed her warm, soft hand on the ice-cold breast, and gently covered the almost nude woman with the bedclothes. Then she went over to the nurse.

‘Can you get me some camphorated oil to-night?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

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'Then get me a bottle of that at once, and add to it about an ounce of eucalyptus. Best get the oil separate, and I'll put in what I require.' In a lower voice she said, 'You had better keep out of her sight, nurse, for her nerves are upset. I'll stay and look after her till she falls asleep.'

The nurse was glad to get away from the termagant, who had been reviling her for the ~~past~~ six hours like a mad-woman, therefore she did not resent this interference with her duty.

'Get the oil, and then stay near at hand in case I want you,' said Beatrice, as she went over to the table where the medicines were. She poured some brandy into a glass, and persuaded Hyacinthine to swallow some. Then she stirred the fire and prepared herself for her task.

She was not at all tired, although she ought to have been after the exertions of the tragedy. She was at the happy age when fatigue can be staved off for a long time. Besides, in a sick-room, Beatrice found her most womanly sphere of action.

It was one of the most sumptuous bedrooms in this west end of Princes Street hotel, for Hyacinthine never spared expense upon herself. The temperature also was right, therefore it depended upon herself greatly how the trouble would terminate.

. During the time Beatrice was acting, Hyacinthine had been raging and fuming while she was able to speak, and now had exhausted herself by her own outbursts more than even by the distemper.

Beatrice crossed over to her and sat on the edge of the bed.

'As soon as the oil comes I will rub you, dear Hyacinthine, until you get warm. Has the brandy warmed you?'

'Not in the least.' I am ice cold, and aching all over horribly. I feel I am about to die.'

Beatrice laid her hand on the silk nightdress and stroked the sufferer quietly, while she murmured soothing words as she would have used to a child. Hyacinthine looked very ill and ghastly. Her short-cut, golden-dyed hair was hideously unkempt, and her face by no means attractive as she lay shivering under that sympathetic glance. She seemed to

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have become an aged woman, and more hag-like and repulsive with the stale cosmetics still upon her.

‘I am hideous, am I not, Beatrice? But I cannot help it. These pains are dreadful.’

Beatrice heard the nurse’s knock and went to the door, where she received the oil. This she warmed at the fire, and then she commenced her work, rubbing the cold limbs back to heat. It was a long and arduous task, but it was soothing, and Hyacinthine submitted to it with the docility of a child.

She felt the benefit of the massage, while the camphorated and eucalyptus oils were absorbed into her skin, bringing back the circulation, so that as the chill was conquered and the pains lessened she became for the time grateful.

‘You are a wonderful nurse, Beatrice, and you touch so softly. I don’t wonder Arnold Kirklock mended under your care.’

Beatrice winced at this reminder, but she did not cease her manipulation.

‘Your legs are warm now, Hyacinthine, but I have made your nightdress in a sad condition.’

‘Never mind that. The cold is mostly in my back now.’

She never once mentioned the theatre, which Beatrice took as a sign, along with the neglect of her personal appearance, that she was really too greatly concerned about her health to think of anything else. Beatrice felt relieved at this, for she had no desire to discuss that subject.

It was over an hour and a half before natural heat could be restored to that frigid form. During this time Beatrice never ceased from her exertions, passing from one part to another, and coming back again to find the place she had so lately warmed once more ice-cold. At length, however, when she touched the feet she found them in a more natural state. The limbs and the body also were moist and warm; only one patch remained as if frozen—that was at the back in the region of the kidneys.

Beatrice was tired out, while Hyacinthine felt relieved but also exhausted and sleepy. She lay on her back, and looked at her nurse with filmy eyes.

‘How strong you are, Beatrice; I think you have saved

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my life. The pain seems gone now, only for that cold, dead feeling in my back.'

'Take another sip of brandy, and turn round on your face while I rub that away also.'

Beatrice held Hyacinthine up while she drank the brandy obediently, then, laying her down, she began again to rub the chilled place. While she did this, the invalid gradually fell asleep, breathing quietly.

It was an obstinate spot to soften and warm, and as Beatrice sat with her hand upon it she honestly believed that she had just come in time to save that life. She had never before felt anyone so rigidly chilled. It was as if death had already gripped her from without, and was swiftly freezing her internals. While she was wrestling with this ruthless antagonist she had been for that first hour almost in despair.

Beatrice trembled with utter prostration. All her strength had been drawn from her during that protracted struggle with the enemy. Yet she had saved her employer, and this made her exceedingly happy. No hireling could have done what she had out of sympathy. Surely Hyacinthine would not grudge her that triumph after this devotion.

Keeping her hot hand still firmly pressed against the lower portion of the back, for when she moved it Hyacinthine stirred uneasily in her sleep, Beatrice sat motionless for hours. It was a white, evil-looking profile upon which she looked, and it now revolted her strangely; it looked so sodden and unnatural, with that falsely-tinted tangle of short, dry hair. The figure was well-shaped and well-nourished, with huge, firm bosoms and massive shoulders. But there seemed something gross, unwholesome and aggressive in the folds of fat that bulged out the thin, silk nightdress now saturated and stained with the oil. She was not an attractive object as she lay with her face half buried in the pillow and her bulky shoulders heaving up.

Beatrice had no thought of being infected with the contagious trouble. She had a firm belief in the disinfecting properties of the eucalyptus oil, but even although there might be danger she would have gladly risked it for the satisfaction she now had of saving this life. Nor at the

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time did she think about the months of humiliation and misery this woman had caused her. That was all over now, and she only trusted that this might make them better friends. If it did she now meant to continue in the company for a time at least. The nurse came in quietly and replenished the fire, while Beatrice still sat motionless. It was close on four o'clock when Hyacinthine woke.

'I feel better, but terribly thirsty. Do you think I could have some champagne?'

She spoke obediently, and when Beatrice had given her what she asked for she sat up and sipped the second glass leisurely.

'I am grateful to you, Beatrice, for what you have done for me, and I forgive you freely for your cross temper. You have a shocking bad temper, you know, dear, but I believe now that you are not bad at heart.'

Beatrice smiled at this characteristic speech as she bent behind her charge to beat up and turn the pillow.

'Now tell me how you got on last night? I trust you did not quite frighten the Edinburgh playgoers away. You were letter-perfect, I hope, and managed to dress respectably for the part.'

'Yes, I managed to say the lines without missing any. My dresses also were respectable, and the house did not empty before the finish.'

'Ah! that's a blessing. I have been so anxious about it that I fancy that made me worse. However, all's well that ends well, and I hope to be able to show them a proper Juliet before the week is over.'

'I trust so, Hyacinthine,' replied Beatrice, meekly. 'But you must not hasten up too soon for fear of a relapse. You were very ill last night. Let me cover you up, and try and get another sleep.'

'Thank you, Beatrice, for your care of me,' answered Hyacinthine, as she sank back on the pillow and buttoned the front of her nightdress while Beatrice tucked her in.

'Of course you must expect a fine roasting, if they mention you at all in the papers, for it was cheeky of you, you know, to attempt such a heavy character. I hope they will say something about you. It will show you your

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faults, and that is always useful to a young actress,' she murmured drowsily. 'I must see the papers to-morrow. It will be something to laugh over, won't it, child? Don't leave me, dear, in case I get worse. Just lie down on that couch where I can see you when I wake.'

Hyacinthine's lids closed as she gave this last order, and she was asleep. Beatrice was now able to stretch herself after that cramped position which she had kept for hours. She rose, therefore, and took several turns about the room. Then feeling the need of an hour or two of rest, for she had to play Pauline that night in 'The Lady of Lyons,' she went to the door and called the regular nurse.

After this she stretched herself on the couch, for she was terribly tired, and was quickly in the land of dreams. It was broad daylight when the nurse woke her, although it had only seemed a moment since she lay down. The patient was still fast asleep.

'If madam wishes to see the papers to-day don't let her, if you can avoid it,' she whispered to the nurse, as she took the cup of tea which was standing beside the couch.

'I understand,' answered the nurse, with a dark glance in the direction of the bed. 'I have seen the papers, and you ought to wish to see them also, Miss Clevedon. They have splendid notices about you.'

. 'Hush!' said Beatrice, with her finger to her lip.

The tea greatly refreshed Beatrice, and she had time to bathe her face and brush her hair before Hyacinthine awoke, with a hunger on her for oysters and champagne.

She did not ask to see the morning newspapers, however, and she was more friendly disposed towards the nurse. This also pleased Beatrice, as she hoped now to get back to her hotel without delay.

While the nurse had gone to get the oysters, Hyacinthine ordered the hand mirror to be brought, with which she examined herself keenly.

'Heavens! What a fright I am! Beatrice, for goodness sake help me to look tidy before that odious creature comes back. She keeps watching me as if I were an ogre.'

Beatrice poured some hot water, from a kettle which was standing on the hob, into a basin, and sponged Hyacin-

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thine's face and hands gently. Then she brought the dressing-case, and placing it on the bed, opened it, revealing its mystic assortment of gold-stoppered bottles and jars. In a few moments Hyacinthine had again the milky bloom on her face and neck, although she still looked haggard and old. Her cheeks had a flabby appearance and her eyes were more than usual torn down at the edges.

'Ah! how this has pulled me down! Who would fancy to look at me that I was only twenty-four? I look ten years older than I did yesterday.'

Beatrice remained silent. She found it difficult to answer this assertion.

'You think I look ill, don't you, Beatrice?' she repeated sharply, glancing from the hand-glass to Beatrice.

'Yes. You must expect this after such a severe attack.'

'Thank you. You look quite your age also, my dear, this morning. I'd advise you to go and have a bath. Late hours do not seem to agree with you. Come and see me after you have had breakfast. The doctor's visit will be over then, and perhaps he will let me relieve you to-morrow.'

Beatrice took her *congé*, glad to make her escape so easily.

CHAPTER XXVII

HYACINTHINE READS THE NEWSPAPERS

BEATRICE had long prepared herself for the opening that chance had given her. Her wardrobe, if not on so extravagant a scale as that of Mrs Hart-Beachcomber, was yet a fairly complete one. She was thus ready at a day's notice to appear in what parts she had studied.

It was her duty to understudy all the pieces which Hyacinthine played, for, with the uncertainty of life, she never knew when she might be called upon, at a pinch, to fill a vacancy, therefore, in the stock plays.

This involves a tremendous amount of labour to the young actor and actress which the world knows nothing about, yet it is all strictly necessary to the student who wishes to make a mark.

Beatrice knew her employer well enough to be sure that she would be accused of treachery and ingratitude for her success. Yet if she had not been ready to do the work she would most probably have been, with good reason, blamed for neglecting her duty. That she had done better than was expected of her was the more to her credit, and should have satisfied a sensible manageress, as it did Artemus Borrymore. For the rest of the week they would be able to suspend the free list and look with confidence to overflowing coffers.

Beatrice had just finished breakfast and sat down to look over the part of Pauline when Artemus entered her sitting-room in a high state of glee. He pitched a bundle of telegrams and papers on the table as he cried,—

'You are made, my dear girl. Several of the leading managers have seen the *Scotsman* and wired to say

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they will be present at to-night's performance. How is the dragon ?'

'Very ill,' answered Beatrice.

'Do you think she'll be able to show up this week ?'

'If she does, it will be at the risk of her life. She was nearly dead last night.'

'I have been to her doctor and given him the tip to keep her in bed as long as possible. Now for business. You must not desert us too soon. Will you sign an engagement with me for six months at, say, thirty pound per week ?'

'No, Artemus, I shall not do that, but I promise to stay on at my present salary as long as Mrs Hart-Beachcomber is agreeable. I am under no pledged engagement, you know.'

'You'll get the run the moment she is on her legs.'

'I'll take it then,' said Beatrice, smiling.

'But, see here, Beatrice, I intend to chuck this fathead, and I know the company will follow suit if I do. Now what is to prevent you bossing the show and keeping us together ?'

'Want of capital for one thing.'

'I'll find the dollars.'

'Sentiment for another. Hyacinthine has not used me well, but I cannot forget that it is through her the gate has been opened for me. She will revile me enough as it is, but my conscience is clear of blame, which it would not be if I broke up her company. Besides, I have everything to learn yet. If I can secure an engagement in a first-class London theatre it will be much better for me, in the long run, than starrng about the provinces. You know I am right, Artemus.'

'Yes. I must own you are right from your point of view, but from mine it is a disappointment.'

'It will not be in the long run,' answered Beatrice, kindly. 'I appoint you my business agent, and from now place all my theatrical affairs in your hands. If I get any offers I shall refer all negotiations to you.'

'Right you are. I'll draw up an agreement between us, and see that you are not let in by anyone.'

'Except yourself, Artemus, and I'll never grudge that,' answered Beatrice, laughing, as she dismissed him.

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Beatrice had already read the notices on her performance, and knew that she was a celebrity since the day before. She could see it in the faces of the servants, and this gave her a new confidence. She could hold up her head now and think of the past as only a hard apprenticeship. Her own and the future of her baby were assured, and a long career of brilliant happiness and wealth stretched before her. She was free, heart whole, young and thrilling with possibilities. What a good geni Hyacinthine had proved when she broke her fetters.

Before going to rehearsal she called on the invalid, and found her like a raging demon, raving against both nurse and doctor. They had both insulted her on the point she held most sacred—her earthly tabernacle.

‘Would you believe it, Beatrice, this hag and that dolt who sent her have dared to open the window and fumigate the room, as if I were something unwholesome and putrid. Good Heavens! am I unclean, that she keeps blowing that vile Sanitas about? The beasts, whom I would not spit upon. Do they know who I am, that they outrage my womanhood in this fashion? Ah, if I had only strength to rise I’d lash them from my presence,’ she screamed, with blazing eyes.

‘It was only to refresh madam,’ said the poor nurse, whimpering, ‘and by the doctor’s orders, whom I must obey.’

‘I know your kind, you she-devil; but I am not dead yet,’ she cried viciously. ‘No one can deceive me. As for you, hypocrite, you would not mind if I did die, I daresay. Perhaps you think you can get along without me, or that you have ruined me with your last night’s bungling. But don’t believe it. I intend to be up to-morrow and at my post, in spite of the doctor. Where are the papers, till I see what damage you have done?’

‘Never mind the papers, Hyacinthine,’ replied Beatrice, soothingly, as she tried to keep the fury in her bed. ‘Keep yourself calm, and you will be better all the sooner. I shall stay to-night with you again.’

Hyacinthine was too weak to resist the firm control of Beatrice. She lay back panting and exhausted, with a maniacal glare in her snaky eyes.

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All at once she laughed mockingly, and said, with curling lips,—

‘Yes, I daresay *you* don’t wish me to see the papers to-day. What pretty names have they called you, Beatrice? I expect they have given you a fine roasting for your impudence. Never mind, child, I shall manage to have a look at them later on, when I am able to read for myself. Borrymore has been here, and tells me you made a proper hash of it, and that the critics are down on you with a vengeance. I do wish I could read what they have said. And what will it be to-morrow, after you have murdered Pauline? Take my advice, and put on an old frock to-night. Ha! ha!! I can fancy the shower of bad eggs and dead cats that will greet you to-night. The students are dreadful fellows, they tell me, in this town.’

Restored to good-humour by that pleasant fancy, Hyacinthine allowed Beatrice to go, while she consented to take her medicine from the hated nurse.

‘I have told Borrymore to announce me for to-morrow night!’ she shouted after Beatrice; ‘therefore it does not matter what reception you get this evening.’

The merciless spite of this ungenerous woman saddened Beatrice as she went down the hotel staircase. Hyacinthine was gloating now over her supposed defeat. What would she do when she learnt the truth? This made the girl’s heart shrink with anticipative horror.

For the rest of the day, she was too busy with rehearsing and the preparing of her costumes to visit again that sick-chamber. Artemus, however, told her, when she reached the theatre, that the invalid was progressing all right.

‘The doctor has ordered her to keep her room for twelve days at least, and he assures me that she won’t be able to leave her bed before Monday, so we have the week clear before us. Wire in and put your best foot foremost to-night.’

After the performance of that stilted drama, ‘The Lady of Lyons,’ Beatrice received an ovation. This time the men who congratulated her behind the curtain were London managers, who had taken the long journey to judge of her histrionic abilities. They were more sparing in their words

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than the critics, but their stinted approval was the more precious. Before wishing her good-night she had received three immediate offers. These she referred to Mr Borrymore to arrange, and then left the stage to dress for her second night's vigil.

Hyacinthine was awake, and sitting up with a wet towel round her head, when Beatrice entered. This, with her sombre eyes and ghastly face, gave a weird effect to her general appearance. She had adorned herself with a showy dressing-gown, but evidently was in a feverish state, for it was open from the waist upwards, and exhibited her uncovered neck and breasts. She had been excited also, for the satin ribbons which served to hold it together were nearly all torn off, and lay scattered in front of her.

There was an ominous and deadly calm about her as she received Beatrice with averted eyes and grim silence, which revealed, even before she saw the shreds of crushed newspapers about the floor, that her secret was known. The nurse also had a guilty look as she crouched over the fire, pretending to attend to the beef-tea. Beatrice shuddered as she stepped over the threshold. The storm was about to burst upon her devoted head.

'How are you to-night, Hyacinthine?' she asked timidly. Mrs Hart-Beachcomber ignored her, while she cried in a tone of suppressed fury,—

'Nurse, give me some brandy and soda while that beef-tea is getting ready.'

'Let me help you, dear,' said Beatrice, nervously, going over to the table and half filling a glass. This she took over to the bed. Hyacinthine had been fumbling, with violently-trembling fingers, at her dressing-gown, but she took the glass which Beatrice held out to her. Then, after a moment, during which the glass shook in her clutching hand, she suddenly flung the contents into the face of Beatrice. As she did so she gave a hoarse, discordant laugh, and hissed through her teeth, while she sent the empty glass shivering to the floor,—

'I asked my nurse to give me brandy and soda, not you, dirty sneak and traitress! Bring me another glass, nurse, and some water to wash my hands after the contact of that one.'

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Beatrice recoiled, half blinded with the deluge, and while she was wiping her face with her handkerchief the nurse sprang up and ran to obey the imperious orders.

Would it be wise to leave this maniac? thought Beatrice, as she stood with her face covered. She could not be held accountable for her actions at this moment. It was a wonder she had not sent the glass with the contents. As she stood undecided the nurse whispered,—

‘Stay with me for a bit, miss. She is going to be delirious, and I’m frightened for her.’

That decided Beatrice. She quietly took off her hat and mantle and flung those upon the couch. ‘This was not the time for her to resent any insult or outrage, when her help was wanted.

‘Ah, you crafty hussy! You mean to stay then, do you? knowing that I am not strong enough to kick you out. You thought you could keep your filthy tricks from me, and hoodwink me with your pretended sympathy? Very well, stay if you please. I want to know how you won over the critics. By Heavens, you wasted no time! Your dressing-room could tell some pretty secrets, if it had the gift of Tennyson’s whispering oak, I swear. They were young louts, I suppose, whom you lured in there while I was out of the way, with Borrymore’s connivance. Ah, yes, stay and put me up to a wrinkle or two. I am such an innocent in professional games, you know. Ah, you are a beauty!’

Hyacinthine was sipping her brandy while she poured out these vile insults with mocking deliberation. Beatrice listened with burning cheeks, yet without answering.

She expected venom, but these charges were so shocking, and revealed such a depth of moral depravity, that after the first stun Beatrice turned to rush from the tainted atmosphere in a condition of horror; but the nurse clung to her, imploring her not to leave her.

‘She does not know what she is saying. Don’t mind her, but stay and help me. She has been over the bed twice to-night, without the strength to stand. I must have someone to help me, for she is a heavy woman.’

So Beatrice stopped, although she was of little use, while Mrs Hart-Beachcomber sat up with the face of a bird of

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prey, and, pointing her finger at her enemy, poured out all the poison that seethed within her.

At length she sank back exhausted, and lay on her back mumbling incoherent words until she fell into a stupor. Then Beatrice stretched herself upon the couch and found some rest.

But she was too excited to sleep long at a time; every few moments she started up wide awake, to see the nurse dozing in her chair and that evil form on the bed. Half the night was past when Beatrice, in one of her frequent starts, saw Hyacinthine once more sitting bolt upright in the bed.

The bandage had fallen from her head, leaving her locks lank and crushed. Her face, colourless and ghastly, had a most inhuman, harpy-like expression, something like a white owl, with blankly-staring round eyes, with the phantom-like and unholy deadness of a nightmare. Beatrice had never imagined such a horrible face in her life before. She felt it would haunt her to her dying hour as the concentration of evil. It was like a hellish spectre, the embodiment of dead sin. She shivered with abject terror as she watched. Hyacinthine held one finger upright near her ear, as if in the attitude of attention. She was evidently unconscious of what she was doing, but malignant hatred was printed on each frozen feature.

'I am a lady of high degree,' she uttered at last, in even, slow tones. 'If I have killed her, she deserved it, and no one can punish me, for I occupy too lofty a position for the law to meddle with me. She injured me mortally, not only in this, but in other things, and I have always hated her. There, take the abhorred dead object out of my sight and let me sleep now that I have done my duty.'

She sank slowly back on her pillow, with her eyes still staring, and on her lips the cold smile of a damned soul.

CHAPTER XXVIII

DISBANDING OF THE DE VERE COMPANY

As soon as she heard the hotel servants moving about, Beatrice stole from this chamber of horrors, and made her way back to her own lodgings.

The morning was dark, raw and chill, as November mornings are apt to be in this northern city. It had been raining during the night, but had ceased by this time, although the pavements were wet and glittering like a river.

Beatrice walked quickly along the protracted street, passing the Castle and Mound, also Scott's Monument, and meeting only a few workmen hurrying along. It was too early yet for the shopkeepers to turn out, and the thieves and night-walkers had retreated to their lairs.

The young actress could not yet afford such expensive lodgings as Hyacinthine lay in, therefore she had taken up her quarters in one of the less fashionable hotels near St Patrick Square. To reach this meant a brisk walk over the Waverley Bridge, up by Cockburn Street, and on, by the South Bridge, to Nicolson Street.

Beatrice was glad that she had this long walk before her, through those almost deserted streets, with the keen, damp wintry wind in her face. It smelt deliciously wet and pure after that sickly drug and scent-laden atmosphere. Wherever Hyacinthine was, the odorous concoction of the perfumer and the wine merchant divided and overpowered the air. It then became a heavy and artificial lung supply that was morally and physically debilitating.

At the first mouthful of Arctic purity which Beatrice received, straight from the North Pole by the Firth of Forth, as she left the hotel door, she felt courageous and braced

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up for her work. It brought the colour into her cheeks, and tingled over her like a reviving cold bath.

Hyacinthine was asleep when she left the room, emitting short, quick pants, with a swarthy flush on her face and neck, and the nurse was piling the blankets on her to make her perspire. She was in a high fever, and although Beatrice would willingly have stayed, she felt that her presence would only excite and madden the already half-insane victim of jealousy. The nurse would be a less obnoxious person for her waking eyes to greet than she would. Any healing influence which she possessed was now gone, and her kindest act would be to keep out of sight and terminate the links which bound them.

It was impossible to act under this woman after these abominable charges. They might be the outpouring of delirium, yet they were the children of her mind, which would increase in virulency as she gained strength. The hatred which bore them was thus implacable even to murder, and that would never become torpid. Beatrice knew her enemy, and had understood the dread meaning of that midnight soliloquy.

As she rapidly passed over the wet pavements, she saw that white, malignant face vividly before her in the mirky morning gloom. It gleamed before her in the dark, like the phosphorescent phantom which the diseased brain of an absinthe-drunkard conjures up—luridly and greenish white, with the milky and opalescent softness of a jelly fish, lit from within. She had seen the drawing of a face something like this in one of the decadent French publications, as that of a secuba or female vampire. It looked unearthly; devilish in its cold and pitiless cruelty; lifeless in its bloodless tones and immobility; vacant in its utter want of human expression. The eyes were lack-lustre, yet wide open and round. Beatrice could only think of an owl staring at a candle as she saw those meaningless orbs. The lips were set, blue and curling upwards in the middle and drooping at the sides. That tangle of dingy, brass-tinted hair made the old-looking, flabby visage all the more hideous and unreal. It was truly a fearsome and haunting spectre that floated before her through those shadow-filled streets.

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As she crossed over the bridge the sky began to lighten. She stood for a moment to look at the picturesque outlines of the Calton Hill, with the massive buildings between. A grey mist spread below and covered the railway, giving it the appearance of a wide river. Out of the mist stuck the chimneys of engines, factories and houses, like the funnels of steamers, while some scaffolding posts looked like masts. In front of her floated that iridescent, ghastly face.

Beatrice shuddered as she hurried up deserted Cockburn Street, with that awful face still receding, but always fronting her. She was almost hysterically rejoiced to meet a batch of workmen and bare-footed mill girls filling the pavement of South Bridge Street. They brushed the phantom for the time out of her sight.

It was only after she reached her own lodgings, however, and had taken a long bath, that the weird vision left her entirely and became merely a disagreeable memory. Before this it had been tangible and enthralling ; now, with daylight round her, and her nerves steadied with the cold water, she was able to close her eyes and rest. After her bath she put her nightdress on and went to bed.

It was nearly twelve o'clock when she woke, and as there was another rehearsal that day, she got up, dressed quickly and hastened to the theatre.

The piece cast for that night was again 'Romeo and Juliet.' The London managers had requested Artemus to put this on once more for their benefit, but the rehearsal was for 'Hamlet,' which was to be acted on the morrow, with Beatrice as Ophelia. Artemus was waiting for her at the stage door, and she followed him, at his request, into his office.

'I have seen Her Imperial Highness this morning,' he said, when they were seated, 'and have received the royal commands to dismiss you at once from her court. You must have had a sweet time with her last night. She is in the most condensed state of ribald fury that I have yet had the pleasure of viewing her in.'

'She was delirious last night, and much too horrible to describe. It is a great relief to be dismissed from the bondage of such a woman. But I left her in a high fever, and thought she would be too ill to recognise you.'

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‘Ah, she has allayed^d the fever by a little blood-letting and crockery smashing. Not her own blood, but the doctor’s and the nurse’s. I met them both rushing down the hotel stairs, the doctor with a flowing nose and the nurse with a cut forehead. I only escaped woundless through the fact that she had used up every article that could be converted into a missile. She has completely wrecked her bedroom. Basin, water-jug, breakfast dishes, medicine bottles and glass ware are blent into a thousand pieces. Ah, yes, she is still delirious—with rage and jealousy as much as with fever. Pounds will not repay the damage she has done to that west-end bedroom.’

‘This is terrible. She will kill herself if she goes on at this rate,’ said Beatrice. ‘How did you leave her?’

‘You should let me finish my account of how I found her first. When I entered the room she was hanging on to the bed rail, with her dressing-gown in rags, and her silk nightdress in very nearly the same condition. She looked for all the world like a boosy, full-fed Kilkenny lady after a wake, with the *débris* of the fight spread around her. Fortunately for me, she was too much done up with her previous exertions to go for me, except with her tongue, so I was permitted to lift her back to her bed and cover her decently. After this difficult and somewhat risky feat was accomplished, my next pleasant task was to propitiate the irate and scandalised landlord. He had sent for the police, and fully intended having her ejected from his respectable premises. The medical man and her nurse also had gone to lay a charge for assault and battery against her. Oh, the joys of a theatrical agent’s life! They are manifold.’

‘Well, how did it terminate? Was she left alone?’ asked Beatrice, impatiently.

‘No,’ replied Artemus. ‘I became responsible for all damages, and afterwards hunted up a new doctor and nurse. He is a nice young man, who agrees with her in everything, and promises to have her cured this afternoon. The nurse is a fat, aged and comfortable Sarah Gamp. I left them both swallowing oysters by the dozen and swilling into champagne in company. Hyacinthine was patronising the nurse, the nurse abasing herself to Hyacinthine, while the

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young doctor was paying her the most fulsome compliments on her youth and beauty. I don't think there will be any more rudeness to-day at least.'

'Then, what about to-night?' asked Beatrice. 'Do you intend to announce her and send me to the right about?'

'Certainly not. Hyacinthine will not be able to leave her room before Sunday or Monday. After that gust of rage she was as helpless as an infant. You must take her part till Saturday night, for we are pledged to the public. After that, my dear girl, however, I am afraid we shall have to part, for the present at least.'

Artemus meant nothing unduly familiar when he called Beatrice his dear girl. If dire necessity forced him at times to become a trifle shady in business matters, he had not a spark of the gay Lothario in his composition. He was compelled to affect a hopeless and respectful devotion towards his tyrant for the sake of retaining his post. But the absent Mrs Borrymore had no cause to be jealous, nor was she about her guileless Artemus. His admiration was purely professional, while the most knock-down glances from the most artfully-shaded eyes made no more impression upon him than did the fairy feet of a fly. It was his habit to call the actors his dear boys, and the actresses 'his darling girls,' without any sinister intentions.

'That brings me to the business which I asked you into my den to discuss, Beatrice. You had better decide at once which of the three offers you will accept, and I'll settle about the screw. You are well worth fifty pounds a week to any city manager. There is Holland of the Craven, Cumberland of the London, and Horace Sheridan of the Casket Theatre. They are all first-rate fellows to get you on, but, if you take my advice, Sheridan is your man. The other two have their regular stars already attached, but he has no one yet whom the public can name as a fixture.'

'I'll take your advice, Artemus, and leave you to fix me up with Mr Sheridan,' replied Beatrice, after a few minutes' pondering. The Casket Theatre was one of the most select and newest of West-end houses, while the actor-proprietor had not yet passed his prime, and already occupied a front rank in the profession. Under his management she would

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have less time to wait and more opportunities of getting better parts than with the others.

'That is settled then. I'll secure you fifty as a start, with a six months' engagement. After that time we can think about better terms.'

After the rehearsal, Mr Sheridan, Beatrice and Artemus met in an attorney's office and made the engagement a fast and settled affair. She was to report herself at the Casket Theatre on Monday morning and begin her London career. She had already accepted her dismissal from the De Vere Company.

How smoothly the lines had been laid for her after that first dire mishap, but for which she might still have been an obscure villager. It now seemed as if every step she had taken had been watched over by a kind Providence, that even the evils were benefits in disguise. She did not consider her hard work, patience under humiliation, talents and personal advantages. Thousands with these qualities were unfortunate where she had been lucky. She felt herself to be under a special supervision and thrilled with gratitude.

There was a charm about her apart from her talents, which only a few of the celebrated actresses are gifted with, and which always means success to the happy possessor. Whatever she did or said she spread round her an indefinable but magic, odic spell that chained the attention and gripped the sympathies of her audience. Ellen Terry has this attraction. Modjeska lacked it, in spite of her exquisite finish and skill. It was this rare and natural, but impossible to be acquired, fascination which made the three managers so eager to secure her services and consent to risk such a large price for her inexperience. It was this seduction which had intoxicated the hard-headed Scotchmen and blinded them to her imperfections.

That evening Artemus Borrymore had a frightful difficulty to face, and an ordeal to pass through never before experienced in his theatrical career. Beatrice had just finished dressing herself for the first act when the agent rushed in upon her with a blanched face and staring eyes.

Hyacinthine had risen from her sick-bed and driven to

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the theatre with her nurse. She was at the moment preparing to take the part of Juliet.

‘It will kill her!’ cried Beatrice in alarm.

‘It will kill us all if she appears!’ shouted Artemus, tearing his thin tresses. ‘She can hardly totter as it is, and is more than three parts intoxicated with the champagne she has taken. Yet I cannot stop her if she insists; and, if she does, the audience who are here to see you will make a riot. What am I to do?’

‘Nothing at present,’ replied Beatrice, promptly. ‘Let her have her way, and say nothing. She will never be able to get the length of the ball scene. You can then go out and address the house and explain that she is out of her mind with trouble. After that I shall go on with the tragedy where she leaves off.’

There was nothing else to be done under the circumstances, and the poor agent retired mopping his face.

The ghastly interlude took place as Beatrice had predicted. Hyacinthine tottered on to the stage and screamed the lines like a raven, while her sodden face wore the expression that had terrified Beatrice in the midnight before. For a few moments the audience sat transfixed with amazement, staring at that gorgon-like spectre; then they rose to a man in their ire and yelled themselves hoarse with anathemas, while Hyacinthine mouthed at them with horrible contortions and shook her fist in their faces. The theatre resembled a pandemonium.

At the height of this infernal tempest—for the Scotchmen were too ferocious to take even a mocking view of it—she might have been laughed at in London, but here she was in danger of being maltreated. Hyacinthine suddenly uttered a terrific scream; it was so shrill that it cut through the thunder of angry voices like a steam-whistle, and was heard with startling distinctness by all. Then she made a stumble forward and a wild clutch at the air as she fell prone upon her face.

Beatrice, with Artemus and several of the actors, rushed forward to pick her up as the curtain dropped. This tableaux silenced the audience, and they waited upon their feet, with gaping mouths, for the explanation.

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It was promptly given by the trembling agent, who persuaded the real Juliet to appear before the curtain with him. The affronted audience were soon appeased, and the play after this went on without a hitch.

Hyacinthine was taken to the hospital in a cab and placed in the insane ward, where she remained for a month, raving mad and fighting with death. The relapse was much more dangerous than the first attack of influenza. However, she recovered as much reason as she had ever possessed, and was discharged as cured at the end of seven weeks.

Beatrice finished up the week with great *éclat*, and departed for London on the Sunday night, accompanied by Artemus and the disbanded company, now bent on an enforced holiday.

Hyacinthine went from Edinburgh to Heloise Villa, which Delphine had been looking after during her absence. Here she met Artemus, and settled up accounts with him. She informed him that she did not intend risking any more money on treacherous agents and theatrical ingrates. For the future she meant to invest what remained with her city friend, Mr Felix Jackal, the company promoter.

CHAPTER XXIX

EDWARD LESSLIE

EDWARD LESSLIE became a grave man after the death-in-life of the woman he had chosen to be his earthly companion. It was almost three years since she had been taken from him and shut within that sepulchre, from which, in her case, there would be no release until the real death came to free them both. Had she died in reality three years before, he would have mourned for a time, and then felt that she was near him again, although unseen. This would have brought comfort to his lonely heart and surcease to his regret.

But her body still lived, and caged the spirit within its darkened cell; held it in dismal bondage from him, while his mourning never ceased, his regrets never died. His life was one long desolation; his heart writhed constantly in restless discontent, and his soul burned in a perpetual fire. He felt like the leper—driven from his kind. A nature more gross and self-indulgent might have found consolation, if not forgetfulness; but with Edward Lesslie the woman who could consent to console him as he was placed would have only increased his misery. He could never have found comfort without faith, and he had always abhorred crude passions as he did false colour and stiff conventional drawing. His refinement insisted on absolute purity in the one and sensibility in the other. Grossness, like vulgarity and selfishness, revolted his delicate perceptions. Yet he was a careless man to look at—careless in his dress and general behaviour. He went openly into places and companies where other men dared only to slink under cover of the late night. He was not in the slightest degree shocked at vice or ribaldry in others. Sometimes he remonstrated genially

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when they were lacking in interest or humour; it was the want of wit or inartistic setting that he deplored as much as the depravity.

‘If we are to have hell, let us at least have intelligent devils, not dolts, with attractive scenery. Only respectability can have the privilege of being dull and ugly,’ he would say, with a shrug of his shoulders, by way of protest. It was only among his most intimate friends, who were few, that he ever talked seriously. ‘Preaching does no good to anyone; besides, I am not sure that my ideas of morality are correct. I only know that they do for me. A lobster supper would kill me, and oysters give me the appearance of measles, therefore I avoid all shell-fish; but many others can take this form of food with benefit and impunity. Whatever makes one feel uncomfortable or mean is sinful to that particular person. Wearing tall hats and black coats, with stiff collars, is immoral to me, because they are uncomfortable. Going to church *for the sake of respectability or example* would be depravity in my case, because it would make me feel mean.’

When asked to state his special amusement by the editor of ‘*Who’s Who*,’ he wrote ‘Slumming and Bar-loafing’ quite seriously, for these were really his only modes of amusement. He, however, felt rather scandalised to read in that useful volume of reference that his amusement was ‘philanthropic interest in the submerged tenth,’ and not a little nettled when his friends chaffed him with his Salvation Army leanings.

When he had been forced to place his wife under restraint, and send her from him, he hired a respectable woman to act as housekeeper, for the sake of his children. The eldest he sent to a private school, and when the next was old enough he sent her to join her sister. His son was yet too young to leave home, but he also would go as soon as possible.

Edward Lesslie loved his children dearly, but he felt convinced that the best way he could prove that love was to separate them from him. He had no desire to cloud their young lives with the gloom that now filled his own. His home was not a cheerful one. He kept the flat still on, because he possessed a goodly number of household gods

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in the form of valuable books and art treasures. But as his studio had a small bedroom attached, he now lived mostly there. He spent one or two nights each week at home, also Sundays, for the sake of his boy, and to keep the housekeeper up to her duties, but his life was really passed in his studio. Here he worked hard, and in his work found the best and most satisfactory consolation. He did not attend any place of worship, because it seemed to him such a waste of valuable time. He had his own ideas respecting the mysteries and obligations of life, which prevented him from finding any consolation or benefit in the doctrines promulgated from platforms and pulpits. Yet his religion was broad enough to recognise that churches and dogmas were as strictly needful to some natures as food was for their bodies.

He was desperately lonely, however, with a dreary sense of isolation, which not even work could banish or fill up. God had considered him strong enough to endure the destruction of life's illusions, and he had at last learnt that this was best for him; but he could not help envying the many who found happiness in their fallacies. He was also very pitiful towards those who were waking up. Life is so much happier to the dreamer, even if the visions have no reality. It is better to be deluded, with most natures, than to be clear-eyed and joyless. This is why to-morrow is veiled from the unprepared glance of humanity—so that we may enjoy to-day. The people who are most wretched are those who have no present, but live only in the past or anticipate the future.

Edward Lesslie was one of the few who could bear disappointment without giving way to despair. He had been adored where he was now abhorred. This showed him that his happiness had been built upon a delusion. He therefore resigned that blissful past, as the brave man who has been amputated buries his limb, as part of himself which can never be restored. Yet he felt lamed, and nearly constantly was reminded of the lost member by twitching memories. At first his art suffered while the wound was fresh and unhealed. This tortured him worse than even the destruction of his illusions. The first loss was a real

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deprivation, the last he saw now had only been a dream, but as time went by, and he knew that there were no hopes of his wife's recovery, resolution and manhood came to his rescue. Where he had divided his soul, work gradually claimed it entirely. Then he learnt his bereavement was not all evil. What he now gained was a better and a higher gift than happiness.

'Such are the uses of adversity ;
Which, like the toad, ugly and noisome,
Wears yet a precious jewel in its head.'

Debarred from all hope of female companionship, he flung himself into his art with the full strength of his ardent yet delicate nature. During the first months of his bereavement he had striven to work as the only means of forgetting. The pictures painted during this stage had been sad failures, both in colour and spirit. But gradually the old passion came back with increased strength and greater concentration.

One forenoon, after months of lassitude, he took up his palette and brushes with a more active desire to paint than he had felt since the catastrophe. When he commenced he seemed to have gained a keener perception of colour and a deeper insight of manipulation than he had before. The model no longer troubled him with her expressionless pose and vacancy. He seemed to be able to see through her his ideal, and he painted what he saw.

That afternoon he laid down his palette with a sigh of satisfaction, the first feeling of this kind which had visited him for months. Of late each time he had cleaned his brushes despair had strained his heart, but this day he washed them with pleasure and longing for another day-break. The tantalising image of his absent lost wife also had become more vague and less troublesome ; she had drifted behind his subject instead of standing between him and it as she had done ever since that fatal day.

After this his work became a joy instead of a torment. Every day his touch became more assured, and his Academy pictures grew with hardly an effort. His sleep at nights became quieter and less crammed with hideous or sorrow-

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ful dreams. His health improved as his mind grew calmer, and before very long he found himself interested and thinking only of his art. He was rewarded by success.

The trustees for the Chantry Bequest purchased his Academy picture for that next year and hung it on the line. This, like the *début* of Beatrice, signified that his days of teaching were over. He could now command ten times the prices which he had formerly received, and have no lack of customers. It seemed at first like the bitter irony of fate, to pour so much money into his pockets when he had no wife to help him to spend it. What he had been able to earn before was quite sufficient for his modest expenses. Still the recognition which his work received was comforting, and he soon discovered plenty of outlets for his increased income.

He was of a charitable disposition, and although he abhorred being called a philanthropist, yet one of his principal pleasures was to relieve necessity. He always slept better after a long walk through London streets. Sometimes he prolonged that solitary stroll for many hours after midnight—along the Embankment, through the parks and over bridges. There was no use taking these directions without being freighted with small change. The man who possessed ordinary bowels of compassion, with an abundance of this world's goods, would be simply lacerated if he went out with empty pockets for such a midnight promenade. There were so many of God's human creatures to be met homeless, hopeless and hungry. It was the stern duty of such a man as Edward Lesslie, who had no society aspirations, to alleviate, as far as he could, these destitute and disreputable children of God. He felt at such times as if God had sold his pictures, and reft from him all desire to shine among the moths of fashion, on purpose that he, and such as he, should minister to these unhappy wretches. He made no reflections on the self-made millionaires, who spent their money dining the upper ten and subscribing to public charities. He looked at the question broadly. These American and Australian capitalists acted perfectly right, according to their light, to entrust their charity to public societies formed specially to protect the *deserving* poor, as

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they encouraged deserving ; that is, Academy-hung artists. It was perfectly natural that, being democratic in their principles, they should desire to stand well with the Prince of Wales and society, as represented in the House of Lords.

He knew also quite well that he was acting most criminally when he gave a shilling or half a crown to a destitute impostor, or a brazen, unlucky street walker, who chanced to be reduced to sleeping on the benches owing to their own want of forethought. But he did not care : they were hungry, graceless and desperately hard up. His donation gave them a drink, a supper or a bed, and somehow lightened the weariness and loneliness of his heart. He always slept better after he returned with empty pockets, if he had filled them before going out, and thus selfishly he enjoyed his midnight walks.

There were other men who, like him, prowled the parks, bridges and embankments. Men who listened cynically to tales of distress while they smoked expensive cigars. They would part from the needy and profligate supplicants with a mocking laugh of incredulity, and a furtive movement of their hands from their pockets to the palm of the tattered objects, then they would hasten away to look at the stars, or to listen patiently to another story of woe.

Like Edward Lesslie, the successful painter, they were members of society who were trying to tire themselves out and win a night's repose, without having to fall back upon their chloral or morphia injections. The disreputable poor—God's sparrows—did a great deal to help these rich unfortunates in their frantic efforts to sleep.

It wasn't philanthropy that moved them to scatter their useless silver and gold. Often the starving wretches were envied objects. It was stern necessity that drove them to be charitable—the selfishness which the angels of heaven take advantage of to relieve the sparrows who are righteously passed over by the wealthy Pharisees. God has his sparrows and hawks to look after, as well as his doves, and He overlooks all, giving to each what is best for the individual.

One night when Edward Lesslie returned to his flat the housekeeper told him that a new tenant had come to the

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one below his. The janitor had told her all about the new comer.

She was the popular actress, Miss Helen Clevedon of the Casket Theatre, and she had her little girl with her. She was a widow, the housekeeper told Edward, as he listened patiently to her gabble.

He had seen Miss Clevedon on the stage, and, like the rest of London, admired her histrionic gifts greatly. He was rather interested to know that she was his neighbour. Above him resided an Italian countess, who was in her way the prettiest woman he had ever seen. He liked pretty women, and artistically he felt pleased that he had another good-looking neighbour.

CHAPTER XXX

ARNOLD RECOGNISES BEATRICE

THE HONOURABLE NEVILLE GRESHAM, with his intended brother-in-law, Arnold Kirklock, had come back to London after a round tour of the world. They had been absent for over nineteen months, and had enjoyed themselves in many lands. The Hon. Neville was the possessor of a fine yacht, so that they had been independent of time and rules. This long voyage had completely restored Arnold to his former robust condition of health. He was quite prepared now to settle down and become a respectable family man.

It was by doctor's orders that he had accompanied the eldest son of Lord Fabro on his foreign travels, for although he had felt cured when he so hastily quitted Devon, a general want of tone followed and clung persistently to him. He began to feel that he possessed nerves, which asserted themselves at the slightest provocation. Late nights left him exhausted, and where hours sufficed to recuperate others, it took him days to recover his freshness. He appeared to be quite well at this time, but unexpected noises would make him jump and tremble. At a crossing of the street a sudden fear would sometimes seize him for the passing traffic and cause him to lose his presence of mind. Life seemed also to have lost its former keen zest, and he grew passive where before he had been impatient and eager—all signs to the experienced eye of the physician that his system had not quite got over that mighty shock.

His courtship of the Hon. Hilda had been of the languid order before his departure. He admired her very sincerely,

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however, and also desired greatly to make her his wife, but he wooed her without impetuosity. After he had braced up his courage to win her, it was almost with relief that he received his marching orders, leaving the date of their marriage to be determined upon his return.

The engagement had, however, been publicly announced, and Lord Fabro was satisfied that the future of one of his daughters was settled upon.

The Hon. Hilda was not quite so content to let her lover rove so far and so long from her ; but she was a well-trained young lady, and therefore bore the forced separation with outward composure. She was a sweet-tempered maiden, and of a dutiful, trusting disposition. She had given her heart up easily to the young man, who had come armed with parental approval. His appearance and manners were all that she could have desired in a lover, therefore she quickly learned to admire and love him devotedly, yet tranquilly, as young ladies in her position are expected to love their future husbands. While he was absent, his letters gave her all the excitement she cared about, and sufficient employment answering them.

The Fabro ladies were all gentle, placid and high-bred women, who could support the social dignity and go about their duties with perfect decorum. Lady Fabro had proved herself an ideal wife and mother, and her daughters took after her. They belonged to the most refined set, that still kept up the lofty character of patrician womanhood. Their photographs were not exhibited in shop windows, nor were their doings chronicled in society papers. Only in the Court columns could their names be read with the other chaste ladies of society, therefore Arnold knew that he could leave his lover with perfect safety until he came to claim her. She would never disgrace his choice. Having plighted herself, she could not be unfaithful even in thought. *England* still can boast that she produces many daughters of this kind.

Arnold was thoroughly satisfied with the noble girl he had won, and as earnestly enamoured as he ever expected to be. She filled his thoughts when he was absent from her in a comforting manner. He never lost an hour of sleep

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for her sweet sake, nor did her image interfere with his appetite for food. This affection was not disturbing, although the memory of her gentle caresses had the power to make him thrill at times.

As a woman she was faultless and fresh as a June rose. Her eyes were like violets in their tender hue, her lips rosebuds, and her figure dainty as that of the fairy queen. It was a keen pleasure for Arnold to recall the hours she had nestled trustingly within his arms, while he kissed her golden, silky tresses, and watched the creamy whiteness of her soft neck and shapely arms. He knew she loved him with all her gentle nature, and also that he had been the first to lay masterly kisses on her dewy mouth. This, with the assurance that she would ever be sacred to him alone, made him wonderfully contented with his future lot. He was treated as a brother by his chum Neville and her sisters, and as a son by Lord and Lady Fabro, while Hilda was regarded as one of the family by his people. This was very comforting and satisfactory to think upon, as well as settling for him. He had paid his fees to Hyacinthine before leaving England, therefore was quite done with her. As for that disagreeable past with Beatrice, that also had long since been driven out of his accommodating mind. There were no obstacles now in his private life to interfere with his future—the pleasant future which Hilda and he were to pass together.

While they were on their return voyage, however, Lady Fabro had died, after a short illness. Like many other noble ladies, she had been interested in district visiting, and had fallen a victim to typhus fever during one of her charitable visitations. This was a heavy blow to the bereaved family, as well as to many outside that circle who were benefited by the kind influence of this virtuous and good aristocrat. It made a sad home-coming for the son and Arnold, to find a house of mourning on their landing where they had anticipated a joyous welcome. The marriage arrangements between the betrothed lovers were, of course, delayed for another year in consequence of this irreparable affliction.

Lord Fabro they found prostrated. He had loved his lady deeply, if he had not been a model husband. Her

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loss was perhaps all the more deeply felt on this very account, for remorse was added to natural grief.

His party also had been defeated, and he was at the time out of office, so that he had nothing to occupy his mind from his own private affairs.

The consequence was that his old and relentless enemy, gout, had seized upon his extremities with the most ferocious and protracted attack he had yet suffered from. To those who have any experience of this torturing malady his lordship's condition may be imagined. On those who, happily, are still free from its fiendish clutch description would be wasted.

Arnold went, to offer his sympathy, to the bedroom where his lordship was confined, and found him depressed to the last degree. He was existing on starvation diet, and debarred from all comforting liquors; his body racked with pain, and his temper past endurance. Only his doctor and his much-tried valet were permitted within hailing distance of his bed. Arnold wisely retreated after a few words, and occupied himself in comforting the black-robed Hilda.

Mrs Hart-Beachcomber, unfortunately for her own prospects, had chosen this *malapropos* time to make another blackmailing appeal to his lordship. The result was disastrous. Her lucky star had been on the decline since that Edinburgh fiasco, which proved to be her abdication.

Her letter was posted on the day of Lady Fabro's death. His lordship received it on the second night of his mourning, along with other despatches from his club. He was furious at the unwelcome reminder of his past wrongdoing to the yet untombed dead. It was an unpardonable offence; therefore he wrote at once to his men of business, ordering them to discontinue the allowance which they had paid so long to the owner of Villa Heloise. Then, what with rage, remorse and grief, the enemy pounced upon him. When Hyacinthine read that death had taken from her the only hold she possessed of intimidating her noble victim, she wished that she had either posted that demand sooner, or else worded it in a different style and delayed it for some weeks. It caused her a great deal of uneasiness for about sixty hours, when her anxiety was set at rest by a curt epistle

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from the solicitors. That cold and business-like letter produced the most genuine attack of hysterics Hyacinthine had ever suffered from. The battle was lost. She had met the Regent Murray.

Arnold was gone. Lord Fabro had escaped. Only her jewellery, *bric-à-brac*, and her new admirer, Felix Jackal, remained. The prospect was as depressing as when in her former life, while existing as Mary Queen of Scots, she crossed the borders of Scotland into England.

Arnold Kirklock was flung a good deal on his own resources during this gloomy time. He took up his abode at his old chambers, and was forced to amuse himself, when out, without the company of his *fiancée*, since she had to remain in retirement. He found time hang heavy on his hands now that he had given up many of his old habits.

One evening, a few days after his return, he went to the Casket Theatre to see the new star, Miss Helen Clevedon. She had appeared during his absence, and although he had heard a great deal about her he had not yet seen a portrait of her. He was not greatly interested in theatrical matters.

It was the first week of a new piece, and Arnold met a great number of his friends in the vestibule, and among them Edward Lesslie. A farce had been put on first, and it was just over when he arrived.

The two friends shook hands warmly, and adjourned to the bar to celebrate their reunion in the customary way.

'I haven't seen this Miss Clevedon, Lesslie. What do you think of her?' asked Arnold, with languid interest.

'I agree for once with the crowd,' replied Edward. 'She is the most natural and refined actress London has had for many years. She has also the natural advantages of youth, beauty and a perfect voice. I think you will agree with me and the rest of her admirers when you see and hear her.'

Edward Lesslie spoke dispassionately, for his admiration was purely artistic. He had not yet spoken to his neighbour, although she had passed him once or twice in the hall of their flat.

'By Jove! you prick my curiosity.'

'She is a lovely girl, for she is not much over twenty, and has the making of a great actress in her, or I am vastly

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mistaken. Let us go inside, Kirklock, for I want to see this piece from the beginning.'

Arnold followed his friend unsuspiciously and without much curiosity. They managed to get places together, through the courtesy of a mutual acquaintance, who exchanged seats. Then, while the orchestra was playing, they commented on their varied experiences since they had last met.

'You have got your old spirits again,' said Edward, looking critically at his friend's sun-tanned face.

'Yes, I am once more as I used to be, and I am glad to find you famous, old chap. It does not surprise me, however, for you were bound to hit it some time.'

'Ah, yes, art has treated me royally. But—my poor wife's condition is hopeless.' Edward spoke bitterly, while Arnold took his hand and pressed it affectionately. He could not find words to meet the occasion. One can sympathise with loss by death, for that is the common fate of all; but madness is too terrible an affliction for language to assuage.

The curtain rose at this moment and the play commenced, much to the relief of Arnold. It was a modern society drama, written expressly for Beatrice, who had been for months taking the principal parts. It was of the refined order of drama, with good chances for subtle acting.

As Arnold glanced round the house he saw in one of the side-boxes Mrs Hart-Beachcomber, with a thin, chalky-faced, dark-moustached man beside her. She noticed him as he looked up, and bowed to him, with a smile. He nodded back curtly, after a glance at her companion, then he fixed his gaze resolutely on the performers. Beatrice was not yet on.

In a few minutes, however, she entered, costumed gracefully in a tea-gown and wearing her own hair. Arnold started violently at the sight and raised his opera-glass. As he did so he heard a loud and prolonged burst of mocking laughter from the box where Hyacinthine was sitting. This rude outburst was greeted with hisses from the rest of the audience and a general glare in her direction. Beatrice, however, paused, and stood waiting calmly till the noise had

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ceased, and then she began to speak. Mrs Hart-Beachcomber meantime had been forcibly removed by the sturdy attendants, amid some considerable excitement and cries, followed by her friend.

Arnold could hardly believe his eyes and ears, yet that insulting laugh had partly prepared him for this astonishing revelation. His opera-glass removed any lingering doubt. The girl he had outraged stood before him in the person of the successful actress.

He dropped his glass and sank back limply in his seat, overwhelmed. At the same moment Beatrice looked straight in his direction and recognised him. He knew this from the slight start she gave and the sudden catch in her voice; then, with a swift smile of scorn, she resumed her part and went on steadily, while he sat and listened with a surge of memories rising within him. He was stunned and stupefied with amazement, lost in wonder and admiration.

‘Heavens! what a superb woman she had become,’ he thought as he wiped his damp brow with his handkerchief, while his blood began to stir strangely.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE MATERNAL INSTINCT

AT this untoward period of her career, strange cravings and yearnings began to stir the depths of that organ which pumped the blood through the veins of Hyacinthine. She felt lonely and *ennui*, dejected and neglected, like a goodly vessel abandoned by her crew and left stranded on the banks of Time.

She spoke to her last remaining friend, Felix Jackal, and tried to describe these strange desires and nameless cravings; but he was not imaginative nor poetical outside the range of his Transvaal gold mines, and he only disgusted her with his commonplace suggestions.

'Hit must be your liver wants stirring up, 'Yacinthine. You need more hexcitement hin your life—speculate some more money in hour company. 'That his sure to give you ha fresh hinterest hin the papers. The market quotations are halways exciting.'

Felix had already the bulk of Hyacinthine's savings invested in the Jackal Family Property Estate in South Africa. She had also pledged the best of her jewellery to meet pressing calls and keep herself and friend straight with the Stock Exchange in other speculations which he looked after for her. Therefore the medicine which he advised was being already taken in large doses without the desired effect.

'That won't do, Felix. There is a hungry want in my bosom, a cry in my soul, which buying and selling cannot answer—a wild, unsatisfied craving for something to love and care for.'

'You ave me to love, 'Yacinthine, and our Hafrican pro-

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perty to care for. Surely these hare enough, dearest,' said Felix, with mild reproach in his dull, dark eyes.

Felix Jackal was not unlike what her husband had been in general appearance and temperament. He was as mild and patient under her gusts of temper. The only difference between the two men being, that whereas the defunct waiter had refused to take a cent from her, Felix was constantly draining her purse. He was a miserable object physically, with his chalky complexion, blackened lips, filmy eyes and gaunt, Israelitish features. His ignorance also on all matters outside his shady business was deplorable; yet he suited Hyacinthine better than her husband or any of her other lovers had done. He was as servile as Athena, Iduna and Delphine, and bore her caprice, insults and castigations with the meekness of a Roman client.

This pair were linked together by mutual interest and other bonds much more enduring than if they had been married. Felix Jackal had drawn her, through playing upon her cupidity, into his net, until she had spent too much to draw back. With the income she had lost she might have done so, before the sending of that fatal letter to Lord Fabro, but now her only resources came through his unwilling hands in the form of dividends, sales and pawn advances. They both existed on the proceeds of his gambling transactions in the city, and to keep up appearances she was forced to pay fortnightly visits to the money-lenders to meet the inevitable city calls. They were mutual partners, victims and accomplices now, without either having the power to break the connection.

In the beginning of this associateship, Artemus Borrymore, who had been introduced to her by Felix, and knew a good deal about that gentleman's reputation, had remonstrated with her, and advised her to keep clear of the Jackal concern.

'You will be ruined, Hyacinthine,' he had said warningly, 'if you don't draw out of that family concern. The name of Jackal needs a lot of fumigating in the city. In that last case, which they lost, the judge finished his summing up by remarking that he had transported much honester felons.'

'Yes, yes, I know,' replied Hyacinthine, impatiently.

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'The judge was prejudiced, and appearances were unjustly against them. Old Mr Jackal is a bit of a Jew, perhaps, but Felix is an honourable man—too simple and straightforward for the scoundrels who impose upon him. The property also is *bonâ fide*, even although you declined being one of the directors, which would have helped you.'

'Yes, to a free situation in Portland or Dartmoor. No, my dear Hyacinthine, I am quite satisfied with the prospects of Holloway Prison, which are always before me. About this property in Africa. You are aware that I made some investigations respecting that land, and discovered that they only hold a lease of it from the Boer Government, and that there has not been a speck of gold taken from it yet.'

'Not *yet*, perhaps, but the prospects are all there when they get the plant set up properly.'

'Humph!' growled Artemus. 'There is about as much prospect of a fortune being dug out of Mars. They have been at this company forming for years, and swindled thousands out of their money without making a start. Trust me, Hyacinthine, it is decidedly too risky a game for you to play at.'

'I have already plunged too deeply to draw out without serious loss.'

'You are wrong. Give it up and forget the loss.'

'Besides, Felix and I are more than mere friends to each other. He has promised to marry me as soon as he can get a divorce from his wife.'

Artemus looked at her with undisguised disgust as he rose abruptly.

'Oh, that makes all the difference,' he said slowly. 'But I gave you credit for having better taste.'

'I am fond of him, and he loves me devotedly,' cried Hyacinthine, with an angry and defiant toss of her head.

'But what about his wife?'

'She is a horrid, vulgar, low creature.'

'And the children?'

'Two sickly, snub-nosed, ugly little beasts. Bah! they made his life miserable. I will make him happy.'

Artemus grinned sardonically, and left her to her fate.

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His conversation had been, like her money, simply thrown away. Artemus, however, was of an inquisitive turn, and he made it his business to inquire a little particularly about this intrigue. He soon discovered all that he wished to know.

Mrs Felix Jackal was an Israelite, like her degenerate husband, who had no intention of playing into the hands of her rival by giving him his liberty. The friendship of Hyacinthine had brought about a legal separation, and Mrs Jackal was at present living apart, with her children, on an allowance, which her solicitor took good care was paid regularly, whoever else was defrauded by the Jackal business. This lady had triumphantly announced that only his death or hers would sever the nuptial ties, so that Hyacinthine's hopes of succeeding her as the stepmother of the two sickly brats were as remote as the fortune she expected out of the African property.

Artemus learnt also that the Jackal affairs were at their lowest ebb. They were unable to secure a single reputable name for their board of directors. The shares were unmarketable, and the whole family were skulking as much out of public notice as they possibly could.

'By George! that fellow will never leave her now while she has a grain of credit to sponge upon. No wonder he is her most devoted slave.'

Artemus felt no surprise as he listened to accounts of how she had bullied and struck this spiritless hound in *cafés* and other public places, while he followed her about like a well-whipped spaniel, and endured his castigations humbly. People told him how Hyacinthine had paraded him before the injured wife in vain hopes of aggravating this woman to desperation. He was glad to find that these wanton attempts were unsuccessful, and then he dismissed them both from his mind as hopeless wrecks. Mrs Hart-Beachcomber could be of no more use to him, for she had struck the quicksands, and nothing could save her now.

However, as yet, life went on pretty much as before in Villa Heloise. The pictures, *bric-à-brac* and furniture still crammed the rooms, although they were mortgaged up to the hilt, and the exorbitant interest on bills of sale had to

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be met by fresh sacrifices each month. Hyacinthine still kept enough sham and real jewellery to adorn her person and deceive her visitors, although imitations had to serve now instead of the diamonds which lay at the pawnbroker's.

Felix dined with her almost daily, for their business demanded that they should meet and consult often.

Their conversations were much more confidential than she had ever held with her husband, even if money-raising was the invariable theme. Yet their interests drew them closer than mere sentiment could ever have done. They had few secrets from each other. Hyacinthine had none from him, and the only ones he kept from her were those held back by craven fear. He was still forced to keep up her hopes with false accounts about that barren property in Africa, and about his wife.

He was far gone himself in consumption, with only a year or two before him to cheat the public, and coin lies, but he told her that his wife was drinking herself to death, and that he would soon be free.

In these respects only was he false to her, and hid the reality, as she hid her own early life. Before him, as to everyone else, she posed as a high-bred lady.

This impressed his vulgar, uneducated mind greatly, and kept him slavish, even more than his poltroon nature did. Her furniture, dresses, ornaments and boasting dazzled him and made him her willing serf, even while he duped her out of her money.

She seemed so vastly superior to him that her violence appeared aristocratic in his eyes. He had been trained from infancy to a life of swindling and foguery, therefore he was wily enough in this respect, if dull and uninformed in others. Before they met he had only dined at restaurants and hotels, but she taught him how to conduct himself at table, and what clothes to wear so as to look gentlemanly. He had read no books nor any other kind of literature, except sporting and market quotations. She taught him to appreciate the glowing flights of her favourite novelist, Marie Corelli, and her pet poets. To him it was like a liberal education to have the lofty privilege of calling this fascinating lady his friend. He thought his wife an unworthy

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person and his children objects to be ashamed of, because this dainty creature constantly mocked at them, and although he swindled her from instinct, yet he was hourly flattered at her preference, and bent under her sudden wraths with abject pride.

And Hyacinthine liked him better than she had ever cared for anyone before, as common minds do care for objects because they are expensive. She could not exist without having plenty of vents for her devilish temper, nor could she live without slaves. Felix she could browbeat, kick or whip as she liked. She also had him at her mercy, inasmuch as he was her debtor. And she had sufficient acknowledgment from him for cash lent to put him in prison when she pleased. But she found more pleasure in keeping him her fettered and fawning slave.

Felix knew the state of her affairs to a shilling, for he had served her with the pawnbrokers and money-lenders. It had likewise been at his suggestion that she had played her fatal card with Lord Fabro. They were now chained together inseparably, and the fall of one meant the collapse of the other.

But to outsiders she kept up the old fiction of being independent in her means. To her parasites, Athena and Iduna, she was still the wealthy patron they adored. Toward Delphine she was more arrogant than ever.

It was on the evening after her forcible ejection from the Casket Theatre that she expressed the strange heart-hunger that was on her, with the loneliness that overpowered her. She was in one of her sentimental moods, and when she heard Felix speak reproachfully about having him and their joint affairs to care for, she looked at him mildly and sighed deeply.

'Yes, Felix, it is true. I have you and the property to think about, and both press pretty heavily at times on my mind, but it seems as if I wanted something else smaller to fling the superfluous wealth of my affections upon.'

'Perhaps a dog or a cat would serve the purpose.'

'No, I hate both dogs and cats. Dogs are clumsy ingrates, cats treacherous thieves. I have been thinking all day about the lovely dolls I used to dress when I was a child.'

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‘Perhaps my little girl might cheer you up,’ began Felix, hesitatingly.

‘Good heavens, Felix, do you think I’d have that woman’s child near me? But all the same you have given me an idea—wonderful to get from you, *mon pauvre ami*. I know now what my heart cries for. It is a girl. But she must be beautiful, and truthful in her disposition, as I am, and then, with my training she shall become a little angel. I shall adopt a child and educate her to be my very own. It is a lovely thought. It was the maternal and divine instinct which was calling to me, and now, ye gods! I have found it.’

CHAPTER XXXII

DECEPTIVE APPEARANCES

ON the third morning after Beatrice had taken possession of her flat in Elsinore Mansions, Miss Mary Gray and Master Harold Lesslie met in the garden set apart for the residents and their children.

It was Miss Mary who introduced herself and nurse to Master Harold and his attendant. She managed what is usually the hardest part of an acquaintanceship with grown people—to break the ice with the delightfully unconventional freedom of childhood.

Being a girl, and only half a year younger than the boy, naturally, Mary was the bolder of the two. Girls are naturally bolder than boys, although as they advance in years so do they increase in guile and prudence. Shyness is one of the fine arts which a maid is expected to acquire after she has learnt her alphabet. To blush, practise bashfulness, and form her lips into correct shape by repeating the word 'prunes' as frequently as possible. Formerly it was all the fashion in the early Victorian days for girls to pretend timidity, but now in the Jubilee era it is entirely optional if required for effect. Shyness as connected with girlhood, like broken hearts, are now chiefly used to bias jurors in the courts of love, where breach of promise cases are decided; seldom if ever in reality and private life.

Miss Mary, while taking the air on this morning, saw, admired, and promptly annexed Master Harold. She acted like Cæsar and Cecil Rhodes—that is, she wasted no time over the business.

'Oo is a nice 'tile boy, come and play with me.'

Harold had wanted someone to play with for a long time,

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ever since his sister had gone away, therefore he accepted the friendly invitation, and thus the pair became allies from that moment.

Mary was three years old at this date, and a remarkably pretty and well-grown child for her age, fair-haired and blue-eyed like a little Saxon. Harold was nearly four, slender and dark as an Italian ; he had his mother's velvet brown eyes and heavy lids, while his hair clustered in bronzy curls round his tawny-tinted forehead. They were a pretty pair of animated flowers as they chased each other over that patch of grass, with its tiny bordering of evergreen shrubs. Beatrice, who was arranging her front rooms, paused to watch them, wondering who the handsome little fellow was.

When Mary came in to lunch, her mother made some inquiries from the nurse, who had exchanged confidences with her neighbour. Beatrice learnt then all about the father of Harold, and also about the boy's mother. Her heart warmed towards the little motherless child and the husband who was thus afflicted. She had already seen his pictures, and knew his reputation as a rising artist. As Edward had felt when he learnt who she had been, she was pleased to know who her upstairs neighbour was.

During the time she had been in London, Beatrice had been much sought after, and forced to go out a great deal. A successful actress cannot live in seclusion, although a successful painter and author may to some extent. Edward Lesslie received people in his studio, but Beatrice had to go into society.

She had given out that she was a widow, and held all male admirers strictly at arm's length. The men who flutter round stage doors, and send notes and jewellery along with bouquets of flowers, troubled her slightly at first, but she soon got rid of them. A word to Mr Sheridan, her manager and fellow-actor, settled these undesirable admirers effectually. The stage is no longer the happy hunting-ground of the profligate, nor are managers the panderers they at one time were blamed for being.

Mr Sheridan was a gentleman with a reputation to keep up. He tolerated no looseness nor license either before or behind the scenes. Actors and actresses who were in his

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employment had to attend to their work, behave themselves properly and leave their own private concerns outside the theatre. If they infringed the rules or rendered themselves in any way objectionable, he dismissed them promptly. Fortunately, as he was somewhat careful in his selection, and paid his employees well, he seldom was compelled to dismiss any of his staff. As for the dudes and moths who occupied the stalls, his orders were strict. They were kept in their numbered places.

He was a married man and his wife was a woman of some position in society. Theirs had been a love match, and among the few of his employees whom he permitted to visit his private house Beatrice was included. She was thus hedged round with safeguards which she might not have found elsewhere, and likewise met many people who gave her a social standing.

She found respected admirers wherever she went, for she had made a sensation, but she kept these also at arm's length. Although she now considered herself a free woman in the completest terms of the word, she had no desire to form fresh ties. Her child engrossed all the attention she could spare from her art. As long as she held herself free she could guard her secret, but she had resolved never to let any man have cause to exercise his generosity or commiseration on her. She would remain a free woman. This was her present and firm resolve. Therefore, she went about gracious and kindly to all, yet guarding her inclinations with a steady grip.

Edward Lesslie and she were peculiarly similar in their situations and opinions. They had both been disappointed and disillusioned in their affections. They were both devoted to their different arts, and successful, and both felt as if they stood apart from the world at large as much as a priest and nun might stand.

Beatrice, however, did not yet know her artistic neighbour, nor did she think anything about him; yet, for all that, his child had opened the way for them to become acquainted, and, as little Mary had done, she broke the ice.

It chanced a few days after her arrival, and the day after she had recognised Arnold in the theatre, that it was Mary's birth-

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day. Beatrice had been now eighteen months in London. Just a year and a half since she had emerged from obscurity and escaped from the clutches of Mrs Hart-Beachcomber.

She was now past her majority, and every day gaining new charms and increased powers. Her health was perfect, and she felt younger than she had done eighteen months before.

Little Mary was her tyrant, and had demanded Harold to be at her birthday party. Mr and Mrs Sheridan were coming that afternoon with their children, also some other married friends. It was a Sunday, therefore they could have the day uninterrupted. To please her girl, and also because she knew that Mr Sheridan was acquainted with the popular artist, she sent with her other invitations one to him and his little son.

She had passed Mr Lesslie three times in the hall. He was a pleasant-looking man as far as she had seen, but she had not looked at him with any interest.

Mr and Mrs Sheridan with their two children arrived early on that Sunday. He was delighted when he heard who was her neighbour.

‘Ned Lesslie, the best fellow in London, and a member of my club!’ he cried pleasantly. ‘I’ll run up and bring him down.’

They had an enjoyable afternoon and evening at that children’s party. Several of the most talented men in London were present, therefore it could hardly have failed in being a social success. The children enjoyed themselves thoroughly as well as their parents.

Beatrice was introduced properly to Edward Lesslie and took to him almost at sight. She knew his story, though he did not yet know hers, and unconsciously she treated him a little more warmly than she did her other guests.

A few nights after this Sunday party they met once more under different circumstances.

It was a mild night, and she was walking home instead of taking a cab. She also enjoyed these late strolls through the streets when her purse could be used.

It was in the middle walk of St James’s Park that she came upon him talking to a tramp. When he saw her he

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left his disreputable companion with the usual contact of pocket and hands—the meaning of which she knew—and joined her. Together they walked home, and, he slept that night in his flat, although he meant to have gone to his studio. They had walked slowly side by side, admiring the silver moonlight and getting at each other's mind pretty accurately, considering their brief acquaintance. Edward was at some disadvantage, as she knew his past to a great extent, while he was ignorant of her hidden life.

What she appreciated mostly about him during this midnight walk was that he was the very first man able to converse who did not take as his subject himself and his aims and predilections. She had often during her professional life been *tête-à-tête* with remarkably clever and thoroughly good and astute gentlemen, both old, middle-aged and young, but all of these, when not paying compliments to her, had invariably filled up the rest of the conversation with ego. The modest gentlemen talked of their hopes and aspirations, the boastful ones of what they had done, with a dubious affectation of making light of them, of course.

This is generally the effect which an interesting woman has upon a man. He may be the most reticent of mortals when with his own sex, but the woman generally manages to draw out his particular vanity. It is the same with man as with the male bird. He cannot help strutting before the female and getting the best light on his plumage whenever he can do so.

Edward, however, had acted differently. When Beatrice said good-night to him at her own door and went inside, she could not recall a single word that he had said relative to himself. He had talked about art on her introducing the subject, but it was other's pictures he spoke about, not his own. She felt a good deal ashamed to remember how free she had been with him, and what a lot she had told him about her aspirations and struggles to get on. She had even told him about the time she had spent with Mrs Hart-Beachcomber. This had been the reverse from her former experiences. Edward Lesslie exercised his usual influence on her that he did on most people, and made her confidential.

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They met often after this first moonlight walk. She did not treat him as she did other men who might have grown troublesome by falling in love. The barriers which were between them and his own quiet, unselfish friendliness, backed by the good opinion which Mr Sheridan had of him, compelled her, with him, to lay aside her usual reserve. In a very short time she felt toward him exactly as she would have felt for a brother.

He dropped in upon her on a Sunday afternoon and took tea with her, while Harold and Mary amused themselves in the same room. If she was inclined for a walk he accompanied her quite naturally, and never uttered a word or gave a look that could have alarmed her. He was greatly interested in her as an actress, and did her good with his honest criticism. She showed him plainly that he was not intruding upon her life nor checking her freedom of action. Although she still reserved her Deepwold past, there was something about her which he understood, without explanation, that this past had closed her heart against any present or future desire to form other ties except those of sisterly friendship. He believed at this time that she was one of the few women who are fated to love only once, and that her affections were buried in the grave with her husband.

A friend of this kind suited him exactly. She filled the dreary void as no male friend could have done, for his sensitive nature required the sex sympathy. She was a beautiful and refined companion to look at, and a gentle, sympathetic comrade to speak with when solitude became too much for him.

He had no fear that he would become infatuated with her in a foolish sense, for he believed his own heart to be as dead as he considered hers to be. If she ever became attached to any other man, he at this time felt perfectly convinced that this would make no possible difference in their friendship. Easy on this point, therefore, he let himself go without the least constraint, and enjoyed her society as thoroughly as she appeared to enjoy his.

In order to remove any fears she might have entertained as to his motives for seeking her so often, he told her early during their intimacy all about his wife, and the cause of

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her insanity. This was another link to hold them closer—that they had both been injured through Mrs Hart-Beachcomber. After this there was very little reserve between them.

He gave her the free use of his library, and Mary soon became as much at home in his flat as Harold was in the one below. He did not sleep so often from home now, and between the two families there was a constant interchange. He also went pretty often to the Casket Theatre after his day's work was over, and it had become almost a nightly custom with him to wait at the stage door and accompany Beatrice back to the Mansions.

If outsiders remarked on this, as probably they did at first, neither of them cared. They were both much happier than they had been before, and their minds and consciences felt free from blame or self-reproach. Their work also improved with the mutual encouragement which this comradeship and daily intimacy gave them.

Several months passed in this placid and unconventional intercourse, and Edward Lesslie became generally recognised as the private associate of the rising actress. When she was asked out his name was usually included in the invitation. They had by this time grown so much accustomed to each other that they did not consider this at all odd.

Beatrice clung to it as her best protection against Arnold Kirklock. She knew that he was a friend of Edward's, and although she had not yet met him close enough to exchange words she had seen him frequently since his return.

Arnold avoided her in such places as they chanced to meet, but he was, like Edward, often at the theatre. She saw him sitting moodily gazing at her while she acted, and if this disturbed her at the first, she had grown used to his presence by this time and treated him as a stranger. When he encountered her in the streets he would turn his eyes away and pass quickly. She was beginning to feel now that her troubles were all over as far as he was concerned; yet, until he was married, she was not quite easy.

Mrs Hart-Beachcomber and her white-faced companion showed up also at odd times, and tried to disconcert her as

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much as possible, but these petty annoyances Beatrice did not mind; she knew which suffered the most at these encounters, and could afford to pity the venom and hatred which only stung the hater. Every triumph she gained was a fresh laceration to the jealous and spiteful woman, who only punished herself by coming to watch it.

One day, however, Beatrice met Arnold where there was no chance of avoiding him. It came as a severe shock to them both.

Edward was painting her portrait for the next year's Academy. She was sitting one afternoon in his studio when Arnold called and was admitted by the unconscious painter. He was inside and the door closed before he saw who was present, then it was too late to retreat. He therefore straightened himself up and acted as a stranger would do under the circumstances.

'I am glad to see you, Kirklock. Permit me to introduce you to my friend, Miss Clevedon.'

Beatrice and Arnold bowed to each other without speaking or looking, while Edward went back to his easel, quite unconscious of the disturbance which he had caused. It was one of those events which occur every day in life, when tragedies have to be acted composedly and bitter hearts are covered by placid faces.

Beatrice sat perfectly still in the pose she had been placed, a trifle paler, but with tranquil features. Arnold passed over to where the easel was and stood behind Edward, watching his hand as he painted swiftly and surely, while through the wall from the next studio could be heard the robust thumping of a piano. One of the models next door was practising, during the rest, at a popular comic air.

CHAPTER XXXIII

FRIENDSHIP

‘I KNOW that airy touch,’ observed Edward Lesslie, referring to the energetic performer on the next studio piano. ‘It might be Rubinstein as far as force is expressed, or the heavy paw of a playful elephant; but it belongs to the prettiest model in London, and she sits mostly for the hands. Her name is Rhoda Drinkwater, and her tapering fingers resemble the high-bred digits of Vandyke’s dames. Unlike her Puritan surname, however, her favourite tipple is double X, nothing so debilitating as water; she uses that fluid mostly to keep her hands in good condition.’

Both Beatrice and Arnold laughed at these not over witty remarks from the mutual friend who sat between them. When a painter is busy with his work and looking out for lights, shadows and flesh tones, he often speaks without thinking what he is saying. Just at that moment he wanted a livelier expression on his sitter, therefore the heavy, sharp thumping through the walls suggested the subject. It produced the desired effect, and that was all he wanted. He went on working rapidly to catch it before it faded, quite oblivious to his visitor.

Beatrice and Arnold were grateful to him for thus breaking the silence which was becoming intensely torturing. They would far rather hear his voice than theirs at that moment, yet Beatrice was the first to speak, and she kept to the subject he had started.

‘Miss Drinkwater certainly has great energy and force in her taper fingers if she has not yet much refinement in her playing and selection of melody. I suppose that air suits her audience?’

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‘Exactly,’ replied Edward. ‘They are two youngsters who go in for sacred subjects, and relieve themselves with music-hall ditties. Rhoda is at present posing as a Madonna for them, and, as far as they have gone, their work is smart and good in the modern French style. They are able to get their present model for half price, and while other and better paymasters are kicking their heels waiting for her to favour them, through the lucky possession of that badly-tuned instrument. Rhoda is a devotee to music, and considers herself no mean proficient. They let her play and she lets them paint.’

‘A Madonna at the piano must be rather a novelty.’

It was Arnold who made this remark. He had found his voice and courage at last. Edward laughed only this time, for Beatrice, with one swift glance at the speaker, turned her face again to the light with its former set expression. His voice had recalled too many bitter memories for her to hear it unmoved. Edward saw the change, and thought she was tired.

‘I must give you a rest, Miss Clevedon. I have been selfish.’

‘No—no. I am not the least tired. Please go on painting to oblige me. I wish you to have a lot done before I look at the picture,’ she cried eagerly, forcing a smile to her lips, but still looking past them. Edward lifted his palette again and made some fresh strokes as he answered Arnold.

‘Oh! They are giving Rhoda what I wanted to give my sitter just now—a rest. When they introduce her as a musician she becomes St Cecilia at the Organ. She was in this character on the walls of the Academy last year.’

‘I recollect the picture,’ observed Beatrice. ‘It was greatly admired.’

‘Yes, they are both rising young fellows—that was the work of one of them,’ said Edward, who was always ready to speak well when he could do so about someone else’s work.’

Arnold had not improved during these few months since his return from abroad. He bore the signs of dissipation upon him. His features had coarsened, and where the sun-tan had been the skin was now coppery-tinted, and with that

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unmistakable general flush which continued and deep drinking imparts. The neck was fuller, and, like the swollen ears, dark red. There were puffy pads under his eyes, the whites of which were pink with distended blood-vessels.

He was also seen at a disadvantage, having been drawn unawares into this awkward predicament. As he stood, leaning with trembling hands against the chair, he seemed to be taking shelter there behind his friend Edward. He was only waiting to find a plausible excuse to get away.

Beatrice longed for him anxiously to depart before she left the dais, for her loathing was too strong upon her to speak to him, yet she dared not exhibit the contempt and hatred she felt with the keen eyes of Edward fixed upon her. She needed all her skill as an actress to keep her features in repose, but she managed it with a heroic effort.

Both men were on a line when she flashed that one rapid glance over them, and she had taken in the difference between them. The man who had betrayed her appeared now a grovelling object and purposeless sot, while her friend, healthy, clear-skinned and bright-eyed, looked doubly attractive from the contrast. Edward Lesslie always showed up at his best when he was painting. His eyes flashed quickly from sitter to canvas, while his face glowed with intellectual expression.

He looked now handsome and masterly with the spirit of inspiration and purpose alive and lighted up. There was no doubt or hesitancy about him at this moment as he met and conquered each difficulty with swift and decided flourishes of his brush. Arnold, on the reverse, as he gazed heavily at the painting, disgusted her, and filled her with savage humiliation. While she waited on him to remove his obnoxious presence from her sight, two red spots began to settle on her cheeks, and her feet tapped angrily on the rug.

'Excuse me going off, Ned, but I have an engagement,' Arnold blurted out, after standing awkwardly behind the chair for a few moments. He had observed the danger signals appearing on that fair face, and felt why they were there.

Edward laid down his palette and rose promptly, with a look towards Beatrice.

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'You are fagged, I can see. Take a rest, and excuse me, for I also feel a bit stiff.'

Arnold bowed in the direction of Beatrice, who returned the farewell salute without rising or looking at him. Then he walked beside Edward to the door. When he was outside he said in a low voice as he shook hands with his friend,—

'I want you to favour me by painting a portrait of Miss Gresham. But we can talk about that another time. Good-bye, old fellow. I'll look in and see you when you are disengaged.'

'All right,' answered Edward, carelessly. He had his hands filled with commissions. Yet he would put these aside to oblige his friend. It was a favour now to get him to accept a fresh commission, and he could afford to select his subjects.

'Lord Fabro would like you to dine with him quietly some evening. Let me know when you are at liberty, and I'll fix it up.'

'I shall drop you a line and let you know,' said Edward, and then they parted.

When he returned to the studio he found Beatrice looking at her portrait. It was in its second stage, and beginning to assume understandable proportions.

'I think that will be like me, Edward,' she said, throwing back her head and shutting the eye nearest to him, while she placed her hand telescope-fashion to the other. They had long since become familiar enough to use their baptismal names when addressing each other in private, although before others they kept to the prefix and surname only.

'It may, Beatrice. All I hope for is to be able to keep it clean and fresh. Likenesses and textures are easy things to catch, but pure colour, and proper values, often evade our best efforts. By the way, why don't you keep up your practice of painting. Some of those water-colour sketches of yours, which I saw in your scrap-book, had considerable feeling about them.'

Beatrice shivered slightly as if a chill had struck her, while she still focussed her eye with her hand. The last sketch she had done appeared vividly before her.

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'I had only a passing, schoolgirl fancy for wasting colours, like the callow attempts at verse of a spoony boy. I have long since recovered from that childish infection. I hope my presence this afternoon did not interfere with any business between you and your friend.'

'Oh, no. Kirklock only looked in about a portrait he wants painted,' answered Edward, easily.

'His own portrait?'

'No. It is the likeness of his intended wife he wants—Miss Hilda Gresham, Lord Fabro's daughter.'

'She is a lovely girl. I suppose you prefer pretty women to paint.'

'Naturally, especially if there is some character behind the prettiness. Miss Gresham has a good deal of expression and possibilities in her face.'

'I do not quite understand you, Edward. Kindly explain, will you?' asked Beatrice, dropping her hand and turning upon him.

'Well, it is a sensitive face. Just now it expresses only content and happiness, for she has found the man who satisfies her young desires. I should say love with her completes the circle of her aspirations, while a disappointment would be fatal. I don't think that she would survive the loss of her lover.'

'Ah, you think not. Yet other sensitive women have suffered this loss and outlived it,' answered Beatrice, a little bitterly.

'The women and men who survive these accidents form two classes. Those who have other aims in life, and those who have strong systems and well-balanced minds. Miss Gresham has a delicate physique, and she has no aspirations beyond what this love gives her. She would droop like a cut flower if reft from it, and give up existence as easily as an Oriental. However, she isn't at all likely to meet this doom with the one she has grafted herself upon. Kirklock is an even-tempered, honourable gentleman, who will quite satisfy her modest expectations.'

'He looks dissipated and weak-minded,' said Beatrice, judging the absent man from what she knew rather than from what her swift scrutiny had revealed.

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'He is an ordinary type of the gilded upper ten who lead aimless lives. A strong man would hardly suit the fair Hilda. Her ideal is a gentlemanly companion, who will treat her kindly and with courtesy. Arnold will always do that. As for his dissipations, he has been having a final fling lately before settling down. The sudden death of Lady Fabro has thrown them all a little out of gear, but the wedding comes off as soon as the year of mourning is out, and then things will adjust themselves properly. Kirklock will then become a country magnate, be made master of the hounds, an orderly member of Parliament, and a magistrate, with a dutiful wife to attend to his bodily comforts. This is the usual destiny of these fast young blades, who possess landed property, after they are safely married.'

Beatrice listened to his conclusions quietly, thinking that the future of this lord's daughter might have been her own but for the interference of Mrs Hart-Beachcomber. Yes; she might have settled down to be Lady Bountiful, and patroness over an obscure village, and a yearly visit to London with its deadly monotony of aimless and fatiguing duties which are called fashion-pleasures. She seemed to see herself, as the years went by, rusting beside this man, and trying to occupy herself with his small ambitions, living perpetually in that prison of routine and dismal respectability, watching him ageing and growing rotund, like a tree planted in a guarded park, while she resembled the ivy. The thought was intolerable to her active intellect. Mrs Hart-Beachcomber had been like a benefactress in snatching her from such a state of vegetation. She roused herself with a sigh of ineffable relief.

'Miss Drinkwater's piano exercise has left me exhausted. If you will excuse me, Edward, from sitting any more to-day, I think I should like a drive in the park before dinner.'

'Certainly,' replied Edward. 'Let us have a cup of tea first, and, if you don't mind, I'll come with you.'

'I should enjoy that greatly if you can spare the time.'

'Of course I can. Time was made for Americans and struggling artists. Let us have our drive and study humanity in Hyde Park, and afterwards dine somewhere together in

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Bohemian style. I intended going to the theatre to-night at any rate.

While the janitor's wife was preparing tea, Beatrice retired to his bachelor bedroom to brush her hair, and he washed his brushes and cleaned his palette in the fixed studio basin. Beatrice knew her way about, and was under no restraint with him. She was very happy and contented with these relations, and never wished them to be altered. His comradeship was all that she wanted to complete her life, and she was glad that she could have it unhampered by conditions of any kind. His son she now looked upon as like her own. He had the same care from her as Mary had. She meant some time to tell Edward all about her past, but she felt it best to hold this back until Arnold was married. Then she would tell him, sure that he would consider that she had acted rightly in ordering her life as she had done. Edward was not conventional in his opinions.

That afternoon, as on many previous ones, they spent the hours together, and enjoyed themselves thoroughly. She saw him in the stalls when she was on the stage, and strove to act her best in order to win his approval. She always felt more inspired when she saw his face, though she did not tell him so. That might have forced him to come oftener than he was inclined, and so spoilt the freedom of action which made their friendship so charming. She wanted no obligations nor forced courtesies. Friendship must be free if it is to be lasting and retain its freshness.

After the theatre they walked home together, he smoking his pipe while she inhaled the fragrance of an occasional waft. She liked the smell of pipe tobacco, although she had not acquired the modern lady-like habit of cigarettes, and Edward liked her none the less for this. Yet he saw nothing amiss in a lady smoking.

They parted as usual with a handshake at her door, and then she went inside and sat down on her rocking-chair to enjoy an hour's reading before going to bed.

She knew he would be doing the same, for sounds came very distinctly through the ceilings of these fashionable flats. She could hear him when he moved about, and also distinguish voices. His presence was thus manifest to her

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constantly, and felt like a protection, so that she was never lonely now. Sometimes he sat up later than she did, but often she was still reading when his quick footstep left his sitting-room as he retired to his bedroom. In the morning also she heard his cheery voice and laugh as he conversed with Harold or the housekeeper.

All his visitors she was acquainted with, and she could recognise their different voices when she cared to listen. His private life was thus revealed to her, and she knew him thoroughly as a man above suspicion or reproach. All his friends respected and liked him as she did. With him so near at hand, her dainty little flat became the dearest home she ever had. She would not have changed it for a palace.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE MATERNAL CRAVING SATISFIED

A DEEP gloom fell upon the sycophants of Hyacinthine when they heard that she contemplated becoming a mother—by adoption.

Hyacinthine had a considerable court of followers in her present incarnation, despite her eccentricities of morals and temper. The meanest animal living possesses parasites. Her lavish hospitality, for she did not stint her clients either in food or drink, so long as they were dutiful, subservient and content to partake of 'humble pie' along with the other more tasty viands, drew the meek, lowly and famished to her table as wasps and bees are drawn to an open treacle cask.

Her French-made toilets and frequent changes of trinkets impressed those who had to be satisfied with home-made, second-hand-shop articles of apparel. These devotees were not experts in jewellery, so that having once seen the stock of real stones with their settings, gold and silver, it was easy to impose upon them with counterfeits. She had often arrogantly scoffed at impostors who wore sham jewellery, and declared she would die sooner than adorn herself, or her statements, with untruths. Most of her serfs had discovered that her facts were not unvarnished despite her haughty assertions, but they honestly believed in the reality of her personal decorations. If this simple faith had been shattered or even shaken, they would have fallen from her as leaves drop from the trees at the first touch of winter's frost. Paste, artfully tin-foiled, will scintillate almost as brightly in some lights as real diamonds. Well-coloured glass shows up as richly as rare emeralds, rubies and sap-

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phires ; while a sixpenny necklet of imitation pearls are a great deal more perfect in lustre and shape than a hundred-guineas' string of the oyster-lacquered grains of sand. As for silver and gold, the Abyssinian and Boulevardian products can give these points and escape detection any day, so long as the acid of conviction is kept from them. The expert would be a brave man if he dared to doubt the word of Hyacinthine and produced his corroding acid. His own face would most likely be the first article tested.

The moneylenders, of course, were not included among the believers of her simple voucher as a lady. They were not, however, her admirers, but only rude and unsympathetic Philistines who pandered to her necessities, therefore their opinions were valueless socially.

To these hangers-on Mrs Hart-Beachcomber was a woman of independent fortune, for whose favour they must truckle or fight about. As long as she could dress, keep Villa Heloise in a state of cram, her cellars filled, and her table supplied, they were bound to bend before her and humour her aristocratic notions. Some of the ignorant really believed in her noble pedigree, as Felix Jackal did. The others, if they laughed in their sleeves at her ridiculous pretensions, still honoured her supposed wealth.

It is pitiful how human beings will abase themselves to this golden image and smother their contempt so completely that they do not see it turning their gorge. They are like drunkards who persuade themselves that their health requires the daily potation. It is also wonderful how men will waste their lives and sacrifice their energies seeking to accumulate what they must leave behind. The aged money-spinner is the most pathetic object which breathes, but the aged crawler is the deepest mystery of fugitive humanity.

Hyacinthine was an economist after the style of patrons in general. She did not give much to her sycophants as payment for their truckling. Sometimes it was a gown which she had used completely up, and had sent to the cleaner until it was hopeless. At rare intervals, a birthday present which she had purchased at some sale or got cheaply be-

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cause it was useless. More often a glass or two of wine or spirits and a share of her dinner. Yet these donations kept her subjects under her thrall, and hopeful.

She patronised all kinds of people—needy actors and actresses, singers, musicians, painters, poets, landladies and other fawning nondescripts. She traded on their hopes and held them in subjection by pure bounce. At times she got for a few shillings, or even a dinner, the labour of weeks with a humiliated kind of gratitude besides. The abject, yet hopeful, wretches went out of their way and sacrificed themselves, imagining she would, or could, be of service to them. She had ruined many foolish people by her pretended friendship and empty ostentation. Some, who had lived modestly on their humble means until they knew her, she forced to launch into expenses that brought the broker upon them. She would proffer her help and lead them on to extravagant ideals—lend them a trifle which they spent on her entertainment, and then leave them brutally in the lurch. Love-matches she had broken off in countless numbers. Homes she had wrecked by dozens.

Yet, because she posed as a rich woman, she managed to attract and keep round her, until they were ruined past redemption, numbers who might have done well if they had never known her.

With desperate craft she still kept up her *role*, although ruin faced her on every side. Only Felix, her mate, knew how hard pressed she was at this time.

With Athena, Iduna and the other satellites she was still the wealthy woman. Many decent people clung to her train and shut their eyes to her behaviour owing to this glamour. Her tradesmen grumbled, but went on trusting when they saw the house still filled and herself able to flaunt about in her bravery. Even Delphine swallowed the story of her money being out in profitable investments when she had to do the disagreeable with the butcher, grocer, baker and milkman.

When Hyacinthine told her humble friends that she intended to adopt an heiress to her great fortune they were disgusted, yet they were convinced in the validity of that fortune. She could not think of burdening herself with a

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responsibility of this kind if she had not something substantial to leave behind her.

The announcement caused a wild flutter among the married people possessed of hostages to fortune, and jealous consternation among the unmarried and childless. Athena and Iduna were exceedingly bitter. Iduna thought she was childlike enough to be adopted, if innocence and devotion were wanted. There was a rush of fond mothers willing to make the grand sacrifice, who were furious that none of their holy offers met the required need.

Hyacinthine wanted a ready-made angel in outward appearance; the soul, mind and heart she would cultivate herself. Lots of the children offered to her selection were nearly right outwardly, but they already possessed biased minds. Besides, as she said to Felix,—

‘I have seen too much already of all these selfish brats. I want something fresh to work upon.’

Felix, always ready to oblige her, and glad to put a spoke in the wheels of her other sponges, also quite aware that his own offspring were out of the running, advised her to advertise in the weekly papers. The Court had given his wife control of his children, and she would have been grilled before she resigned one of them to this hated usurper.

Hyacinthine jumped at the original idea, and flattered him for his ingenuity.

‘You are decidedly improving, Felix, dear, under my care,’ she said rapturously. ‘If you go on like this I shall begin to be proud of you.’

Together they composed the advertisement with the aid of several Sunday newspapers.

‘Wanted, by a lady of wealth and noble birth, a little girl to adopt as her heiress. Child must be beautiful, truthful and docile, and not older than seven. Gentle breeding preferred, but not insisted upon. Mother to give up child entirely. Terms, etc., privately arranged.’

It was Felix who suggested the final paragraph about terms, etc. It would be more practical to finish up the advertisement in this way, as terms were generally mentioned

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in cases of adoption. Mrs Hart-Beachcomber added her name and address, and then prepared herself to receive applicants.

On the same forenoon that this advertisement appeared, Sergeant Quick from Vine Street called to find out her reasons for wishing to adopt someone else's child. When he was admitted and received by Hyacinthine, he approached the subject in his customary gentlemanly manner.

'How do, ma'am? Last time we met was about a very delicate bit of business. You will remember me, I daresay—Sergeant Quick from Vine Street police-station.'

'Oh, yes, you called on my former painting-master, Mr Lesslie, over some disreputable affair in which he was mixed up,' answered Hyacinthine, with great dignity.

'Exactly. And now I have called on you to know what your little game is in this baby-farming ad.'

'Baby-farming?' echoed Hyacinthine, indignantly. 'I wish to adopt a child.'

'Precisely, my dear ma'am. That is just what such a number of good, kind ladies want to do nowadays, Lor' bless ye! Their hearts are so brimming over with motherly instincts that they are always spending money in advertising for babies.'

'But I don't suppose many of them can offer such a home as this is,' remarked Hyacinthine, with a wave of her ringed hand.

Sergeant Quick looked slowly round the drawing-room into which he had been ushered, and then he said,—

'You are right, ma'am. The 'omes as they mostly offers 'ave more room for babies to sprawl about in, with much less precious articles to take their minds from the bottles of water with which they are mostly fed.'

Hyacinthine smiled proudly as she replied,—

'Nor such an adopted mother as I am, sergeant.'

The sergeant looked at her with undisguised admiration. She was just the type of woman that he specially admired. Rubenesque in her proportions, cream-tinted, gorgeous in her attire, with lots of gold and glitter about her, and tresses the colour of a fresh-made sovereign. His eyes wandered from her bright locks to her slipped feet, where he saw

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what completed his conquest as a judge of quality—silk stockings. She was a perfect lady.

‘Exactly, ma’am,’ he said more respectfully, ‘and that worries me all the more. If you was a person like the late Mrs Dyer, we could drop to the motive without any explanations and keep our eyes on your after proceedings without giving you any warning ; but with such a place as this, and, as I may say, such a thorough lady as you are, it has points of mystery about it that I’d like cleared up. You want to adopt someone else’s child? What for, seeing you have youth, beauty and money on your side?’

Hyacinthine blushed, as she replied softly,—

‘I am a widow, sergeant.’

‘It must be your own blame, ma’am, if you remain one,’ cried the sergeant, gallantly.

‘Perhaps ; but I may prefer my liberty, and I have an objection to very young children.’

‘Ah! Well, there is something in that also. Now, just satisfy my curiosity. The terms and the etceteras—particularly the etceteras—them’s what we want to understand. You’ll excuse me calling about this, but, believe me, it is for your own good I have done so.’

‘Tell me what you wish to know and I shall satisfy your curiosity.’

Hyacinthine spoke quite mildly, for she had a great respect for the representatives of the law, and Sergeant Quick had flattered her both by his admiring glances and his soothing words. She gazed at him with gentle inquiry.

‘Well, it is this, ma’am : the terms and etceteras are the principal parts of these adoptions generally. Sometimes it is twenty pounds down with the baby and no future applications expected. Then we step in when we can get on the track, and try our best to act the part of the forgetful mother. When I say we, I mean the S. P. C., who employ us to look after those blessed babies and see that they have a bath occasionally and a flavouring of milk as well as water in their feeding-bottles. You understand. Sometimes we are able to save fifty per cent. of the little victims from an early grave and keep the adopted mothers from the scaffold.

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It is a mighty unpleasant duty, but still it is a duty. Now what are your expectations, eh?’

‘I expect I shall have to pay something, but I should not like to give more than ten pounds for a baby.’

‘Oh, that’s the game, is it?’ cried the sergeant, jumping up excitedly. ‘That puts the shoe on the other foot, and you may be thankful that I have called this morning to keep you from being swindled. The S. P. C. will be quite easy about your case, for it is out of the common. Just you give me the ten quid, and send the parent of the child you fix on to me to settle about the etceteras, and I’ll see that you have that youngster for the money. Here is my private address. I’ll do this business confidentially for you.’

Hyacinthine gave the worthy protector of infancy the money and a half bottle of wine. Then they parted, mutually pleased with each other.

For the rest of the day Villa Heloise was besieged with mothers and their children. Hyacinthine had a vast number of all shades and ages to pick from, for, as society is regulated, children, particularly girls, are drugs in the market, and mothers are only too happy to get rid of them on any terms. They are so different from pigs.

At last she decided upon a little maid of six years old, whose mother was the widow of a poor clergyman. Eva was the name of the purchased white slave. On both sides her parents had been well born, and she possessed the desired qualities—health, beauty and a proper training. She was a sweet and docile child, and Hyacinthine felt she had made a good bargain.

It was much cheaper than she would have paid for a little negro in the Southern States before the emancipation, while Eva was as completely her property as any Topsy could have been. The parting between mother and child was subdued, but decidedly painful. Hyacinthine felt glad when it was over.

Sergeant Quick gave the mother a pound out of the etceteras, and kept nine for his own expenses. He warned her that she must on no account annoy the owner of Villa Heloise nor Eva, and bade her be very thankful that her encumbrance was so well placed. So the poor woman

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went away to mourn by herself her own desolation, while she tried to be thankful for the sake of her child. It was one less to struggle against starvation for. She need not fear the wolf so much after this.

Hyacinthine had done another kind action, and felt blessed, for she had what she yearned after—a child to train up to be the pure and holy saint she was herself.

CHAPTER XXXV

ARNOLD KIRKLOCK IS BEWITCHED

THE vacillating mind is always the seat of unhappiness. When it has fixed upon its course, be it for good or evil, it finds peace. Weak and yielding men are ever miserable objects. A resolute criminal is a better man than a weak, kind Christian, for the one may be relied upon to keep faithful to his purpose and word, but the other is only a lath which requires nailing.

Arnold Kirklock, since he had seen Beatrice, had become the most irresolute, and therefore the most unhappy, wretch unhung.

She had burst upon him unexpectedly in all the perfection and glory of her young womanhood. The perfection he once possessed and might have retained but for his own folly. He did not term his past behaviour by any harsher word than folly. Many murderers also call the atrocity which convicted them a folly when they look back upon it. What we may consider and stigmatise as a crime in others we are apt to find extenuating circumstances which soften it wonderfully when committed by ourselves.

Arnold Kirklock sat in a state of stupor on that first night in the Casket Theatre. He was trying to understand how Beatrice had become so great an actress in so short a time, but he found this beyond him.

He had expected that she would improve in her personal appearance, but he never dreamt that she would develop into the dazzling and finished woman she was now. All through the performance he watched and listened to her exquisite voice, enthralled by the fascination that touched everyone. To him, however, it was intensified tenfold by

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recollections. During the intervals and afterwards he made some careful inquiries, and was both pleased and angry to listen to the character that her admirers gave her. Not a whisper of scandal was uttered. If on the stage she was all fire and tenderness, in private life she was stated to be an iceberg and unapproachable, yet he knew otherwise. She had been tender enough once to him.

For a week after this he kept rigidly away from the theatre, and devoted himself exclusively to Hilda Gresham. If he could have married that young lady at once all might have been well with him, but this was out of the question. The death of Lady Fabro forced them both to wait.

Then, as soon as he could travel, Lord Fabro was ordered off to the Continent to drink the Carlsbad waters and go under treatment. His last attack of gout had been a serious one.

This command meant the taking all his household with him, so that Arnold and Hilda were once more parted, as he did not feel disposed to leave London so soon after his return. The lovers parted affectionately, Arnold promising to run over to Carlsbad before long.

While he could see Hilda every day, he did not think much about Beatrice, or if he did, only as something to crush out of his mind. It was after Hilda was out of sight that his thoughts began to act as traitors to the fair aristocrat to whom he was pledged. Then he began to haunt the theatre and take nightly potions of the poison-cup.

She was known as Miss Helen Clevedon to the world, but a few people knew of her as a widow with one daughter. To them she was known as Mrs Clevedon. Arnold naturally thought that she must have married an actor in her early theatrical life, after he had left her, and that this daughter was the result of this short union. He never considered that the child might have been his own.

At this time Arnold could not have explained, even to himself, why he was drawn to that theatre so constantly and irresistibly. The sight of Beatrice gave him no pleasure, but rather filled him with tantalising misery. Her beauty, grace and gifts tortured him, and left him a prey to gnawing discontent. He had no desire to get closer to her, for the consciousness was forced upon him that while she had

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grown out of his level he had remained still, or rather had sunk lower than he had been.

He no longer even respected her, for respect with such a nature means only vanity which has been flattered by fidelity. She had not lamented his loss long, for once he saw her in the park with her daughter, and guessing at Mary's age, he concluded that Beatrice must have married a few months after their parting. There was no reason why she should not have done this after his behaviour to her, only it argued to him that her affections had been light and easily forgotten. While it stabbed his vanity, it also killed his respect.

He was drawn to her presence by a species of hatred and ill-will, which soon took such complete possession of him that it haunted him day and night, and drove him to drink. When he was not watching her with sombre eyes and sullen brows, he felt forced to drink the time away till he could see her again.

He never applauded her as others did, although a kind of personal and morose triumph surged within him at her success. If any man near him had dared to express disapproval, he would have struck that man savagely and remorselessly. He was proud of her beauty and her charm, even although they loaded him with discontent.

Yet he did not want to speak to or about her. When he went into the bar during the interval, it was only to drink brandy by himself. He would sit at a table, with his hat over his brow and a cigarette between his lips, brooding. If one of his many friends addressed him, he would return a curt answer that discouraged further converse. Thus gradually he was left alone. When the bell rang, he would stalk back to his place and sit out the next act sullenly.

'Kirklock is becoming a misanthrope,' his acquaintances would remark. 'Something gone wrong with him that he is no longer sociable.'

If a man wants solitude in London, he can find it more easily than anywhere else. He has only to cease being amusing and his friends will quickly leave him alone. The solitary drunkard soon becomes a tabooed object. After a few careless remarks, his friends cease even to observe his habits.

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Arnold Kirklock arrived at this stage in a few weeks. He was allowed to go into his club, dine at a spare table, and read his letters and papers without a single head being raised. They never associated his constant attendance with Beatrice. They supposed he came to kill time, the deadly enemy of young men who have tasted the dregs, and begin to experience the premonitory symptoms of liver.

His engagement to Lord Fabro's daughter was public property, and he was looked upon as one whose destiny was settled, therefore of no further interest to either dowagers or pleasure-seekers. No one cared whether he went to bed drunk or sober, since he would not drink with them.

During the day he conducted himself as other young men of his class do. He showed himself at cricket matches, race meetings, exhibitions, in the Park, and wherever else the dreary round demanded. He was never the worse of drink, although he tiddled freely, until he reached his chambers. There, however, he would sit for hours with his pipe of strong tobacco, and the decanter of brandy at his elbow, brooding darkly and aimlessly. He read no books, and wrote only strictly necessary notes. Those to his absent lover were brief almost as telegraphic messages, while sometimes he left her long and fond letters unopened for days. When he did open them, he merely glanced them over and pitched them into the waste-basket with an impatient sigh.

He was haunted by the image of the woman he had betrayed. No pale and reproachful spectre imploring him with wistful glances to repair the wrong, but a bright, joyous vision, which mocked his impotency, and left him grovelling in abject self-abasement while she soared above him like a star, serene and bright, as above a worm. He had thought himself her superior in Devon by reason of his birth. He now knew that she had always been his superior in worth, and was now recognised as such by her social and artistic successes. Verily Beatrice Gray was now amply avenged. She filled the mind of this man with an engrossment which she could never have hoped for in her youthful days.

It is said that passion once cooled can never be revived.

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Perhaps not. Arnold Kirklock, in those early days, only had a mild liking, which was not even so strong as the attraction that had since drawn him to Hilda Gresham. But now he was entering upon a new passion which was likely to land him in hell—an ignoble passion, if you will, bred from hatred, self-contempt, wounded vanity and unwilling, because hopeless, desire. He believed what they said about her—that she was holding herself select and reserved in order to capture a lofty title and a great position; and he felt sure that she would achieve her purpose if she conducted herself as she was doing. He knew that it was as hopeless to expect her to yield to him again as it was to think that Hilda could be false. He no longer respected Beatrice. How could he since she had married so quickly after what had passed between them?

Yet the passion, or insanity, which had possession of him was becoming so resistless and overpowering that if he had the ghost of a chance he would cover himself with infamy to win her. Already Hilda had become a contemplation of fear and repugnance to him. Her letters made him furious against her, and when he thought of this marriage, he groaned with hopeless despair.

He tried to picture himself as free, and accepted by Beatrice, but this only tortured him. She had loved him, but he knew the charm was gone to revive that love. She might be persuaded, or coerced, into accepting his hand; persuaded out of pity, or coerced out of fear, if he was base enough to threaten her with exposure.

But what he wanted now—complete possession of herself—could never again be his. She might marry him, but, God! what an unsatisfactory and heart-corroding union that would be, he regarding her for ever with fear and jealous bitterness, while she felt for him only contempt. Before this could be accomplished he must make himself the most infamous social outcast in England, break the heart of a trusting girl and be driven out of every respectable club. Again, if she did take him after all these sacrifices to honour, what sort of nature must she *now* have, with what sort of past, since he had abandoned her? It was horrible. It was the foretaste of an everlasting and torturing hell.

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When he came to this stage of his musings, as he always did, for, like the scorpion environed by fire, his mind was for ever running round a circle in the hopeless endeavour to find a break, he would seize upon the brandy and drink himself into a condition of sottish stupefaction. In the morning he would wake with shattered nerves, and prepare himself for another weary day on Fashion's wheel, and another evening of self-torture. No wonder he sat in the theatre like a death's head at a merry feast. He had no longer the strength of will to keep away, although he still possessed pride or shame enough to run out of the enchantress's way when he met her accidentally. He could not make up his mind what to do, and while desire nearly throttled him, he still wanted to stand well with the world.

It was in this pitiful state that he met Beatrice in the studio, where there was no evasion. He had read her feelings for him as she sat before him, and he was convinced that she abhorred him too utterly for him even to have the chance of acting infamously.

When he left the studio he got into a cab and drove to the stables, where he kept his riding-horse. There he mounted and rode out to the country. He passed several villages at a breakneck pace, and did not draw reign until his steed was thoroughly exhausted.

Then he drew up at an inn and ordered supper and a bed. That night he finished a bottle and a half of brandy before he fell asleep.

Lord Fabro and family had returned to London a few days before this, but Arnold had only visited Hilda twice since their return, and on these occasions cut his visits as short as possible. He could no longer bear the sight of Hilda, and she was already beginning to droop at his changed appearance and palpable neglect. His excuses were so unsatisfactory, while his gloom and bloated appearance oppressed her with strange forebodings. He had been so different with her before they parted.

Next day he rode back to London and put himself into the hands of his valet. He would try to exorcise this accursed enthralment, and return to his duty.

CHAPTER XXXVI

SHAPING AN ANGEL

THE advent of Eva seemed to bring a special sign of grace to the tottering rafters of Villa Heloise. She entered upon her new obligations like an angel of good fortune, for luck came with her the same as it does with naturally-acquired children at their birth.

It has been so often observed in the homes of the needy that bad luck seems to turn to good when a baby arrives that it has come to be an established belief among the poor. Perhaps this is why they have so many children; they are in such constant need of alleviation from their ever-pressing wants. True, the bright streak doesn't last very long, but, like the rainbow, it is a sign of God's grace while it shines out. Without these streaks and rainbows, despair might cause the indigent to revolt, and then what would become of our kings, aristocrats, churchmen and plutocrats? These little sunbeams keep the majority hopeful and submissive. Being able to taste now and again what those whom they support with their toil waste every day, they gratefully take up their yokes once more, and look forward hopefully for another rainbow. This hope is the divine gift to life. It lifts us from the present and blinds us, like a dose of calomel, to its discomforts. When anyone disturbs this inspiration he becomes the servant of Satan, for the Devil is the destroyer of hope. Hostile, *i.e.*, youthful critics, when they are extra wanton, become devil-slaves, and their crimes are more heinous than murders. Devil-slaves are those irresponsible and long-tailed imps who attend witches' Sabbaths. *Ergo!* Don't aim at being a hostile critic before you have cultivated a forked tail, a pair

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of goat's horns and a pig's hoofs. Try rather to become an inventor, and cultivate a pair of wings, or an honest workman, and cultivate endurance. Any insect or reptile who has poison fangs can be a hostile critic, which means stinging and biting; but it requires a *God*, or His image, cultivated man, to discriminate and praise. It is so easy to point out a fault, for that requires no training, only native venom; but to point out a greatness or an originality requires research and knowledge. Any schoolgirl or spiteful woman may be a fault-finder, but it takes a lifetime to discover an original soul. I often wish that the critics were more ambitious, and would sometimes try to make a rainbow for themselves, instead of aspiring to hoofs, horns and tails. Perhaps if they would spare time to study what comes with their own children, if they have arrived at this stage of maturity, this might give them the philosophic lesson of discretion,

Hope is a lovely gift. It makes men strive after lofty ideals, it produces glorious possibilities which our sons and daughters lift to loftier heights. It makes poets, painters, novelists and inventors. It creates children with pinions attached to their heels, where their parents limped along on crutches. It changes mud to aerial and prismatic tints. It softens stones into bread, and changes bread to roasted ortolans encased in fig leaves. It makes men dream of heaven while they suffer the pangs of earth. It makes a poem of the grossness of love, the sordidness of gold, the trickery of fame, the weariness of friendship, and the drudgery of toil. It lifts man up to the level of the Creator.

What is life and death outside of its magic touch? The one a continuation of disappointments and pains. The other a swift escape. When the murderer slays his victim he only releases him from the slow and torturing vengeance of nature, which is more merciless. While man lives he is never free from haunting care, unless he has hope to sustain him. That is the caviare which gives life its edge. And can the hell-cat imp congratulate himself on his smartness who flecks at this with his uncouth tail? Better get a surgeon to operate on tail, horns and hoofs, so that he may look something like a man. If he personally doesn't feel all

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the better for the amputation, he will at least have the *entrée* to humanity. Hyacinthine was a born critic, being an ex-lady's-maid, so that *she* would not have sympathised with these remarks.

All the same she felt, as did her business partner, Felix Jackal, that Eva was, like the Paris hunchback, a lucky addition to her household. She was obedient, intelligent and docile to an extraordinary degree. Hyacinthine gave her one day to learn the bicycle, so that she could accompany her on her rides and go errands, and the child became a proficient in four hours. She got a French teacher to train her in that elegant language, and Eva mastered 'The House that Jack built' in four lessons. She was a wonderful child, as eager to please as if her life depended upon it, as eager to learn as if she adored instruction, and, after the first day, as watchful of her client's wishes as any Roman slave could be in the days of Nero. In fact, she soon had the alert look of the sold dog Gellert. Quick-brained children soon learn their gags when they are sold to a tyrant. A plebeian Saxon might have sulked, but Eva was of pure Norman descent, and proved her breeding by her adroitness.

The night after she was installed as the future heiress of Hyacinthine, Uncle Felix came in. He had now taken the title of uncle, as Mrs Hart-Beachcomber decided to call herself auntie to this young stranger.

* Affairs had gone well that day in the city with their speculations, which meant ill for many others. When pious gamblers offer up thanks for their own success, they are at the same time thanking Heaven for the disaster inflicted on others.

'Allah be praised for this fine colt!' said the Bedouin, as he led his plunder clear of the ravished tents.

'The Lord hath delivered my enemy to my sword!' Oliver Cromwell cried, as he saw the psalm-singing Presbyterians leave the hill-top.

However, Uncle Felix was not piously disposed, therefore he took his chunk of luck as dogs bolt their cut-up meat, leaving Auntie Hyacinthine to offer up thanks at her own leisure. The market had been on their side, and their affairs were once more flourishing. A large number of shares, which he had bought for auntie when they were at

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a low par, had risen that day at a sudden bound, so that he had realised enough from the sale of a third of them to clear their feet the next settling-day, and bring her a considerable cheque besides.

'It is the dear child, Felix, who has changed our fortunes. She is a dear little thing, or rather will be when she has been under my influence for a little while. Her mother, however, must have been a weak, senseless fool, and has all but ruined her with over-indulgence.'

This Hyacinthine said loudly before Eva, who was sitting on the couch with a picture-book in her hands. The small girl did not look up, but the heartless words sank into attentive ears.

She was a pretty child, with fine features and deep, rich brown eyes, the kind of face that a daughter of Mrs Siddons might be expected to have. It was a clever face, subdued yet, and with the expression latent, as might be expected under the new circumstances in which she was placed. She did not comprehend yet her position in this house, but with the unfailing instinct which children and dogs possess, she felt that she must lie low and keep her feelings under control when with this new aunt.

She was pale and thin with want of proper nourishment and the pent-up air of the crowded, wretched quarter from which she had come. Her poor mother had found living at all a very hard matter since the death of her husband. Before his death also times had been exceedingly hard with this wretched family, otherwise the destitute and widowed mother could never have made this sublime sacrifice.

Little Eva's heart was very lonely and miserable as she sat with that expensive picture-book in her lap, but she dare not show what she felt. She was prettily dressed in a ready-made white cashmere, with open-worked white silk stockings and dainty white shoes. She never had worn such a charming dress before. Upstairs in her bedroom were half a dozen other dresses, purchased to keep her going until the fashionable dressmaker could fit her out as this stranger auntie had planned. She was a new toy, over which a good deal of money was being spent to show her off as the sample *protégée* of such a devotee to costume.

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She had been carefully abluted in a perfumed hot bath, and anointed with the skin-softening and beautifying unguents and lotions in which Hyacinthine was such an adept. No royal child could have been more carefully superintended. Her silky tresses were brushed and perfumed by Delphine until they shone and smelt deliciously.

Her small finger-nails were trimmed, polished and speckless. She was almost alarmingly clean for a child, and felt afraid to move in case she might disarrange her toilet or soil her hands and immaculate dress.

She had been fed on the most nourishing foods since her arrival, and forced to stuff herself with the most flesh-forming concoctions. Hyacinthine had watched her eating, and ordered her to go on eating long after she was replete. This did not add to her present comfort, although she dare not mention it. Everything had been done to force the child to be contented and grateful, except the one thing that Hyacinthine could not give her, nor thought at all necessary—the tender sympathy and love of that lost mother.

All day long between the intervals of gorging she had been driven ruthlessly from one task to another, as the Roman slaves used to be by their remorseless owners.

Hyacinthine spared no expense on her fads, and she was still able to command credit. She meant this girl to be a prodigy and a thing to exhibit as a sample of what she could accomplish when she took a child in hand. She had no time nor patience to study or bother about such trifles as natural weakness or fatigue, and in her system of training tenderness had no place. In this she showed her royal pedigree, for queens do not usually study the convenience or health of their favourite subjects.

She insisted on devotion and slavish compliance with her desires, ignoring all signs of exhaustion or bodily infirmity. She made rules, and expected them to be followed strictly. She did not allow for accidents, and what the child pined for—a kind word or a little indulgence—did not enter into her scheme of education. She would dress Eva, feed her, wash her, and train her as the child had never been before and for these advantages Eva must be docile, quick, affectionate and tireless.

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Gellert the dog had been brought up on the same principles. His pretty whip still remained for Eva when she and her owner were better acquainted, if she failed to come up to the lofty expectations of Hyacinthine in her duty and her love.

Eva, as yet, was fresh and eager to please. She was also almost phenomenal in her aptness. Her unfortunate father had descended from a long line of scholars, and her mother was also a highly-accomplished lady, although compelled now to take in sewing for her miserable existence.

That morning Eva had taken her first lesson on the bicycle from Hyacinthine. She had risen at six o'clock for this purpose, and as early rising did not agree with Hyacinthine, and morning generally was the time her temper was the least under restraint, Eva had an experience which greatly impressed her childish imagination. Hyacinthine's system was simple and Napoleonic. She merely said, 'Eva, here is your bicycle, and this is the way to mount and ride it. I give you half an hour to be able to stick on. Begin.'

She glared so ferociously at Eva as she uttered this terse command that a deadly horror chilled the little heart and killed all lesser fears for the unknown machine. She watched Hyacinthine mount and balance herself with staring eyes, her brains roused up to sudden activity by her terror.

Twelve times she tried to imitate her instructor, who watched her tumbles with an evil scowl and unfeeling gibes and bitter threats. On the thirteenth failure Hyacinthine slapped her face viciously, while she raved at her for being a fool.

It was the first time in her life that Eva had been slapped or treated in this brutal fashion. Her little body was bruised already with her falls, and her heart was bursting with despair. But those cruel eyes and mocking lips drove from her all hopes of commiseration or sympathy; they also sent back the tears that were rising, and her stinging cheeks and ears made her forget the other aches.

In frantic desperation she leapt into the saddle for the fourteenth time, and succeeded in retaining her seat. After this, the rest of the morning was devoted to teaching her

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deportment. Hyacinthine did not compliment Eva upon her success, but she extolled herself on her training.

‘I knew I would make you ride that bicycle before breakfast if you were not a pure idiot. Come now and get a bath. I shall take you for a run with me as soon as your costume comes home. Don’t you forget what I have taught you between this and then, or—’

She did not finish the sentence in words, but her look was eloquent. Little Eva followed her meekly into the villa, and for the rest of the day obeyed her orders with nervous alacrity.

This day was divided into sections for such instructions as were considered necessary for the destined future of this enviable little heiress. A female teacher of languages was sent for and ordered to train her pupil, not in the rudiments, but some words and recitations in the French language, so that she might entertain visitors. Luckily for Eva, her mother had not neglected her little daughter’s education, so that she was already able to grasp the meaning of the words, and learnt her part a little more intelligently than a cockatoo would have done. Hyacinthine sat through this exercise and added her valuable help in the actions. Nerved on by this new-born fear, Eva learnt the words with feverish rapidity, and aped each gesture with grotesque exactitude.

In the afternoon Hyacinthine gave her a lesson in English elocution. Again Eva followed her delivery and gestures so faithfully that the great teacher expressed herself satisfied with the progress of her dutiful little slave.

‘Come and kiss me, child. I shall make you a lady very soon, in spite of your mother’s shameful neglect.’

In order to win the entire heart of her adopted niece, and wean her from old associations, Hyacinthine always finished each remark by a disparaging allusion to the child’s own mother. This also was part of her system to make people love and admire her. Eva went over tremblingly, and kissed her as she was ordered. Then auntie sent her upstairs to wash her hands and face and tidy herself for dinner. This last command was the pleasantest to obey that Eva had heard that long and miserable day.

CHAPTER XXXVII

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BEATRICE was sitting one forenoon at the window of her tasteful drawing-room. She was engaged in the womanly task of knitting a woollen comforter and watching the future wearer of this article, Harold Lesslie, as he ran about with Mary in the garden beyond. This window faced the garden, and likewise commanded a good view of it through the railings. Beatrice liked to watch the children at play while she sewed or knitted as she studied her parts. This was the portion of the day that she devoted to her study, and knitting always helped her to think. While her wires darted in and out the wool, she could build up her scenes, study her effects mentally and plan out her costumes. None of those who knew her habits ever called upon her before three o'clock.

She was sitting dressed in an easy morning robe of grey holland, with no pretensions to style, although it suited her graceful form admirably; her ruddy tresses gathered up loosely, for they were still damp from the bath, and her feet only slipped. She looked charmingly fresh, dainty and modest, with nothing of the actress about her outward appearance.

It was the month of September, balmy and warm still, although the heat of the summer was nearly over. She had just returned from a fortnight's holiday at Scarborough, where Mary and Harold had been with her, and, like the children, she was somewhat ruddier than usual from the sun's reflection and the ocean air.

Her friend Edward Lesslie was at present in Norway, where he had gone early in August. That morning a long

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letter had come from him describing the scenery and telling her that he was about to return. She was glad to know this, for she had missed him more than she could have thought possible while they had been together.

What a change he had wrought in her life since he had entered it. It is so easy to glide into a friendship, yet so hard to break from the most platonic of ties when once they are formed.

With many people friendship, like love, is followed by attachment and sacrifice on one side, with toleration and interest on the other. One out of every dozen marriages is made up and lived out on such conditions. Contentment is generally the result of these social contracts, unless some disturbing element enters. The one who tolerates and receives is usually the most contented, yet the other who gives could not be happier under any other conditions.

Beatrice and Edward stood on equal grounds, as far as give and take were concerned. As yet they had not felt anything unnatural in their positions. He perhaps was the least exacting in his claims, but then he was the strongest and the most philosophic.

It was fortunate that their pursuits were on such different lines, as this kept them from any criticism or jealousy. They were both able to admire each other's success without the slightest taint of envy. Not that their noble natures could have nourished such unworthy feelings in any case, yet this prevented any suggestions of rivalry from ever attacking them, even to be repulsed. It is just as well for earthly friendship that no rivalry can exist. She had no wish for their fraternal relations to be altered. It was her perfect confidence in his nobility and freedom from passion that made her so unguarded and confidential with him. This confidence had not been easily won after her bitter experiences, yet she felt that he was the only man she could hold in her heart without fear. She had proved him in many ways, and he had come out of these tests flawless. He was her true, pure knight, whom she could trust and honour above all other men, and in whose protective, loyal friendship she had found peace, with the return of her girlhood faith in man.

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Before he departed on this tour, and they were so constantly together, the only feeling that possessed her was contentment. This daily concourse was all that she desired.

But during his absence she had begun, as women will, to diagnose her heart. A woman is a born psychologist. She will probe where men leave feelings alone as long as possible.

She took it as a good symptom that she was able to contemplate her friend's love for his unhappy wife without the slightest pang of rivalry. Her affection for his boy also was deep and utterly free from the slightest taint of jealousy. She was able to think of his melancholy, at such times as his memory recalled the afflicted woman, with unadulterated sympathy. These feelings she could not have if anything warmer than friendship moved her.

But with all her disinterestedness, Beatrice was forced to push from her the thought of Grace recovering from her malady and once more coming between Edward and her. She knew that only a miracle could bring this end to pass; she had read the reports of the doctor, and also seen letters from the patient, which proved that the doctor was right in his opinion. Each letter was more incoherent, blurred and blotted than the former had been. The caligraphy of Grace had formerly been remarkable for its fine Italian character, but now it had become the unequal and formless sprawling of an untrained child. In places it shook as if the hand was paralysed and unable to trace words. The spelling also was deplorable. Every letter showed a marked and rapid decadence. Mrs Lesslie had been a lunatic before, but now she was imbecile. There could be no possible hope of her recovery.

Beatrice never once wished her death, although this would have been a mercy for the poor woman, losing all her human faculties as she was. Although she almost despised herself for her selfishness, yet she dreaded the death of Mrs Lesslie. She wanted to keep going on as they were doing, without any change—to keep her friend only as a friend all her life, if possible. While Grace lived this was possible and exceedingly pleasant to think upon.

It was a false position, of course. Platonic friendship

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between the different sexes is always an anomaly, particularly in youth. Yet there are many instances where it has continued through life without being disturbed.

The two children outside were as warmly attached to each other by this time as if they had been really brother and sister. Mary was the most dominant, and Harold always submissive, therefore the usual tiffs between children were absent. The boy always did what the girl wished him to do, thus they never disagreed.

On one of the occasions when Beatrice glanced over to them, she was startled to see a gentleman sitting on the seat with the children in front of him. He was speaking to Mary, and the nurses were at some distance. This was no unusual sight; but when the stranger raised his head and looked in her direction, she recognised, with alarm, Arnold Kirklock. He was asking questions of his own child.

Beatrice knew what had happened by an instinctive flash. He had discovered the relationship between him and Mary, and was about to visit her.

She hastily left her seat by the window, and drawing the curtain in front of it, she stood back watching the scene with angry eyes and quickly-throbbing heart.

Would he dare to come and visit her now that he had found out her secret? If he did, what could he want? She had missed his hateful face in the theatre for a week or two after that meeting in the studio some months ago, but he had since come back to haunt the stalls as formerly. Yet he had avoided speaking to her when they met on the street or at other places. He had always raised his hat and hurried past her with averted eyes. Had he at last braced up courage to face her and hear the truth?

Well, if he came she would admit him and hear what he had to say. He could not interfere with Mary, and she knew that he was shortly to be married. He might as well know her opinion of him, and then, perhaps, she would be rid of him for ever. After she had spoken to him it was not likely he would come to the theatre any more.

She therefore braced herself up to the inevitable, and waited for him with her past hatred once more active and deadly.

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She saw him pat the child's head, who drew back from his gloved hand with shy fear. Then he rose, and leaning heavily on his cane, he left the garden and crossed the street.

There was something in his trembling gait suggestive of nervous debility and premature age. His face had a purple shade over it, and his crisp hair was grey at the sides. Since she had seen him in the studio he seemed to have grown ten years older.

Uncertain and hesitating, he approached the open hall door with his head held down. Yet she saw him give a side look at her window, and knew from that she had been seen by him from the garden.

She heard his knock, and when the servant brought his card she said quietly,—

‘Admit the gentleman, I shall see him.’

Next moment Arnold stood humbly before her, hat in hand.

He was a miserable-looking object as he paused before this wronged and enraged young woman. Worthier of contemptuous pity than the passion of anger that made her at this moment more magnificent than ever she had appeared on the stage. Broken down and degraded with drink, abject and enfeebled with hopeless desire, he bent before her like a condemned criminal while she towered above him like an offended goddess. His eyes were sunken in his head, and his hair thickly sprinkled with silver threads. Her blue-grey eyes blazed with fury, and her tawny tresses bristled on her head like the mane of an enraged lion. The contrast was too pitiful between that unnerved frame and that matchless woman in her majesty, strength and imperious youth. She could have crushed him like a worm. For a moment both remained silent watching each other, then she spoke with short, fierce accents.

‘Well, Mr Kirklock, what do you want with me?’

‘I learnt the other day that you were still Miss Gray, and—and—’

‘Yes, I am still Miss Gray, and likely to remain so. The child also that you were speaking to just now is mine and—yours. Do you wish to know my history since we parted?’

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If so, I will tell it to you, as I have nothing to conceal from *you*, her father.'

Arnold bowed his head. He could not yet speak; he could only listen to that fierce, hard voice now striking at his weak heart like a hammer.

'After you left me with your—friend, Mrs Hart-Beachcomber, I nursed my grandmother till she died. Then finding that I was a disgraced woman, I left the village where I had been respected and hid my shame among strangers. When I could leave my child I went on the stage under my present assumed name, Miss Helen Clevedon, and have become what you find me—an independent woman. Independent of you and all the world. I need not tell you my struggles to gain this position, now that I have given you the skeleton of my life since *you* wrecked it. These would not interest *you* further could you understand them.'

'Why did you not give me the chance to repair the wrong I did you, Beatrice? I loved you and intended to marry you.'

Beatrice burst into a bitter laugh as she replied scornfully,—

'*You* able to repair such a wrong? *You loved me!* Ah! that is good to hear after what I saw and heard in the wood.'

Arnold was stung into courage now. He had fought with his infatuation until all self-respect and resistance was killed. He lifted his head and looked at her with burning eyes.

'Listen to me, Beatrice. I was a contemptible fool, but I loved and honoured you then well enough to marry you. I did not regard that folly with Mrs Beachcomber as anything serious. I expected you would have shown more sense and forgiven me for that slip. Afterwards, how was I to know the extent of my love?'

'I accept your excuses, sir. Let us forget the past, only please don't repeat that word *love*. It sickens me.'

'But I must repeat it, Beatrice, for I cannot live without you. I love you now as man never loved woman before.'

'And you are about to marry the Hon. Miss Hilda Gresham. What sort of love do you offer Miss Gray?'

'My hand, and all I possess. I must break from this

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engagement!’ cried Arnold, hoarsely. ‘Marriage with Hilda would only make us both more wretched than we are already. Have some pity on me, Beatrice, and be my wife.’

‘What pity did you have for me?’

‘For the sake of our child, Beatrice, take me and save me from myself. For the past six months I have been going to the devil for love of you—you alone can save me. For the sake of Mary—she told me that was her name—marry me.’

Beatrice looked at him for the first time with a little commiseration as she saw the havoc his evil passions had wrought upon him. She believed that he loved her now sincerely enough, if he had not done so before, but she remained firm.

‘I have forgiven the past, Arnold, but for your sake, for my own, and particularly for Mary’s sake, I shall not marry you. I never loved you, although once I might have done had you been true to me. I have nothing but dislike for you now, and that I could never get over. You would be more wretched with me than without me, and I have too high a sense of right to give any man I despise the authority of a father over my child, although accident may have made him so. Let us part and see each other no more. Be honourable if you can to your promised wife. *She* still believes in you *if I cannot*.’

Arnold gazed on her with such despair that all her resentment left her. She held out her hand and said softly,—

‘Good-bye, and forget me.’

‘Never!’ moaned the unhappy man, then, with a sudden burst of rage, he cried, ‘I cannot give you up. You must be mine, even if I have to tell London what we have been to each other.’

Beatrice became rigid and icy in an instant.

‘Tell all London. I shall not deny it. Now leave me, for your presence is loathsome to me—you reptile.’

She touched the bell as she spoke, but Arnold did not wait for the servant to appear. With a muffled roar he staggered towards the door and left her standing calm and cold as a statue.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE JADED STEED

UNCLE FELIX was a long-suffering and remarkably patient individual ; yet these virtues were taxed to the utmost when he visited Hyacinthine. He was exceedingly proud of her, and put down her ebullitions of temper and other caprices as only natural in one of her birth and breeding. He had seen duchesses and other ladies of quality represented on the stage, and they always conducted themselves as she did. On the stage they stormed and cuffed their servants about as she raged upon and cuffed him when something or other roused her. He never knew when she was going to burst out, nor what offended her, any more than did the trembling attendants of the stage duchesses. It might be that he smiled when she wished him to look grave, or didn't smile when she expected him to smile. It might be that he spoke when he ought to have remained silent, or displayed too much discretion when she wished him to express an opinion. Although many rules were made by this lady, one never knew how long they were to remain in force. What was right one moment was a heinous offence the next, and being grand vizier to this sultana, the full weight of her displeasure generally fell upon him.

Yet he bore these changes of temperament with a devotion and patience worthy of a better cause. Had he but served his lawful wife with half the zeal he served this reincarnated queen, he might have competed successfully for the flitch of bacon.

His vanity and interest, however, combined to keep him docile. To place his legs under her mahogany, and be seen with her at theatres, concert-halls, restaurants, and in

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the fashionable streets, elevated him up to the seventh heaven. He felt as if he was shining in society, and driving in the car of Fashion alongside of one of her high priestesses. It glorified his hum-drum life of sordid chicanery and thieving, and gave him the poetry which every human being craves after. His ideal of life was to appear as much like a gentleman as possible. Hyacinthine picked up his dropped h's ostentatiously, and so impressed him with her superiority. She spoke for him when the dread of either dropping or adding the perplexing letter rendered him shy. It seems strange that an aristocrat can drop his g's with impunity, a Scotchman grind out his r's, and in company with the Irishman murder the Queen's English as they please without shocking society, and yet the poor Cockney cannot pronounce 'hair' as 'air,' and 'air' as 'zair,' without being treated with contumely and regarded as an uneducated person. It doesn't seem right somehow, but still it is so. Felix, like Gladstone, was able to run up a complex sum with marvellous rapidity and unfailing accuracy. He was also able to draw the blinders over a whole roomful of Oxford dons with respect to Stock Exchange matters, and yet he felt ashamed of his pardonable lapses. Fancy a Scotchman ever being ashamed of his birr before either Queen or Kaiser.

Hyacinthine suggested his necktie, and ordained the twist of his moustache, and the cut of his coats, vests and trousers. Before he had known her two pound ten was the price of his suits. Now he promised to pay seven and ten guineas without a murmur. A twopenny smoke had satisfied his Sunday cravings while leading a virtuous domestic life, with a glass of double stout ; now he ordered eighteenpenny cigars for every-day consumption on the credit system, while he drank high-priced hocks, clarets and champagne.

It was Hyacinthine who taught him these lordly habits ; also to take a cab instead of an omnibus when he went into the City. Before she had patronised him he had confined his scoundrelism strictly to business. Now he had developed into a glorified rake and a high-toned *roué* who courted the attention of the Divorce Court. He considered his educa-

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tion very nearly complete, and all owing to the radiant Hyacinthine. It was surely a small price he had to pay for these social advantages, only to endure her wayward caprices and occasional public chastisements. She was his treasurer as well as his *cicerone*, and he felt proud of his bondage.

Everything was on such a refined scale at Villa Heloise. The table service was so complete. The serviettes, which Hyacinthine told him ought properly to be called napkins, were so daintily folded by Delphine. The company he met here all spoke so far above his head that although he sometimes felt weary, as we daresay even Lord Salisbury does sometimes at a royal levee, the honour compensated for such ignoble bodily infirmities. When the goddesses Athena and Iduna came and aired their eruditions and their artistic prattling, Felix felt that, if it was all incomprehensible and high-falutin, it was the way swells disported themselves. When Hyacinthine favoured them with a song or a recitation he was entranced, and put it all down to his own bad taste if he didn't quite enjoy it as much as he should have done.

His business experience, however, showed him that these flattering if select visitors were sponges as he was, and in his private moments with the reincarnation of the Royal Stuart he dropped many sly hints to put her on her guard against being imposed upon. In these moments of abandon Hyacinthine had shown him she was no simple girl.

'I know what they are all after, Felix, dear,' she would say with a crafty leer. 'But trust me. They sha'n't draw me more than I think needful to keep up my position.'

She explained the adoption of Eva on the same politic grounds when in her confidential moods.

'You see, dearie, we must keep up appearances until our affairs are on a firmer basis. This child impresses people that I must be a wealthy woman, and that is what we want just at present. Of course, I shall do my duty toward her, and refine her while she is with me.'

'Don't you intend to keep to Heva, 'Yacynthine?' asked Uncle Felix.

'Oh, Felix, shall I never train you, you dreadful boy?

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Yes, if our affairs go on as we anticipate, I shall keep the child if she is properly grateful. But I have been taking notes of her during the past few days, and I find grave faults in her. She is cunning, and has a way of watching me that I don't like. I am afraid Eva is too old-fashioned and too old-womanly for my simple mind. I fear she is deceitful and ungrateful. Her mother must have put low ideas in her mind. However, we shall see. She is certainly quick at picking up things, and if I can eradicate those early vices from her mind which her parents have given her, I may keep her, provided I can afford the expenses she causes. If not, then I have her mother's address, and can always pack her back. She and her foolish mother will have cause to be grateful for my tender care of her meanwhile.'

Uncle Felix chuckled quietly to himself as he listened to these confidences. Eva had been now four weeks at Villa Heloise, and Hyacinthine had taken the turn against her. It was only a matter of a few more days or weeks at most before she got the run. When Hyacinthine began to suspect she was mightily quick to verify her suspicions.

'It is the way of haristocrats, I suppose,' he thought philosophically. It was curious how these two partners in business and vice deceived each other and themselves. Felix believed implicitly in her aristocratic pretensions, while he cajoled her about the African property which he knew was valueless. Hyacinthine believed in the property into which all her savings had been plunged.

Hyacinthine had been entertaining the two goddesses that evening with a young man whom she had persuaded to leave a comfortable post in an office to try his fortune on the operatic stage. He had a young wife and child depending upon him, but Hyacinthine had proved to his satisfaction that fortune waited him as a singer. He had no training and no vocation for this new life, but his patroness told him not to fear, she would back him until he won success.

Hyacinthine had lent him enough to meet his quarter's rent and taxes, nearly due, and had taken as security his furniture. The foolish young man had gone away that night fatuously hopeful.

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'Why do you burden yourself with these people?' asked Felix.

'Oh, the furniture will cover my outlay, and I can easily tell him next time he asks for a loan that all my spare money is out in speculation,' answered Hyacinthine, lightly.

Felix was satisfied. Little Eva had been kept up till nearly ten o'clock reciting 'The House that Jack Built' in French, and other juvenile pieces. She was in bed now tossing wildly on her pillow, and going all over the scenes in her troubled sleep. She had been driven horribly during these four weeks, and her little brains were boiling while her heart was torn with abject and wild fears. She could think of nothing now except her tasks and her task-mistress.

She was like a pure bred horse which has been urged on and whipped frantic by a boorish clown. She was running now at full speed, and would continue to run until she broke down utterly.

She had become almost elfish and preternatural in her intuitions. There was a weird and evanescent brilliancy in her beauty. Her dark eyes shone as if lit from behind. Her cheeks glowed with hectic flushes. She had become restless, watchful and jerky in her movements.

When asked to do anything, she sprang with such feverish activity to do it that she was startling to the nerves. She did watch Hyacinthine as a mouse might a rattlesnake. She was watching in order to anticipate the unexpressed wishes of this embodied terror. As for her lessons, she learnt them so swiftly, increased as they were each day, that Hyacinthine began to think she was a little witch, and regard her with dislike, jealousy and fear.

These feelings, once started, would be mushroom-like in their growth. Tasks had been piled upon this fine active brain without discretion, as boys cram young birds with food. That selfish, empty, senseless and callous woman, seeing the eagerness of the child, spurred her on remorselessly. She was like the brutal fool who hires a horse and only thinks to take his money's worth out of the beast.

Eva had not heard a kind word during these four weeks, except the furtive words and timid caresses bestowed upon her by Delphine when Mrs Hart-Beachcomber was out of

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the house. The visitors before whom she was paraded, Athena, Iduna, Uncle Felix and the other parasites, regarded her with cold looks and jealous disapproval. They extolled Hyacinthine for her wonderful skill as a trainer, but made the poor child feel their dislike in a hundred sly ways. Only a doctor or a mother could have seen the warning signs of brain wear, only a mother could have opened that strained and pent heart. She was almost past crying now, and had become a galvanised piece of untended, yet incessantly-worked machinery.

That afternoon Uncle Felix had met Hyacinthine by appointment in town. She had taken Eva with her, and the three had gone to a restaurant for tea.

Hyacinthine had caught what she fancied were significant glances passing between the man and the child across the table. With her usual disregard for public opinion when roused to fury, she had gone on like a virago before the waitress and other customers, smacking both vigorously over the ears, much to the entertainment of those around.

Uncle Felix and Hyacinthine were once more reconciled and loving friends, but Eva had gone to bed with the vile words still singing in her brains, and her head burning with the undeserved punishment.

She was sleeping, if that nightmare could be called a sleep. As she tossed about and turned her flushed, dry face from side to side, she moaned and mumbled, out excuses and whimperings for forgiveness. It was only in her sleep that she made any remonstrances, and they were heartrending, had anyone been near to listen. Her tyrant filled up her dreams as she did the day.

But the room was dark, and the door closed so that no earthly ear heard these broken gasps and cries. Downstairs Hyacinthine and Uncle Felix were concocting a bit of revenge against the detested enemy, Beatrice. Something to take her pride down a little.

Uncle Felix was writing two anonymous letters at her dictation. She had discovered something of the private life of Beatrice, and guessed at what she did not know.

One letter was to Beatrice, filled with petty spite and foul innuendoes, the sort of mean and poisonous nastiness that

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only one woman can think upon to wound another. The other letter was to Edward Lesslie, whose name she had heard coupled with that of the young actress. He was asked to inquire about the mysterious father of Mary, and some of the fancies expressed on that night in Edinburgh inserted as the reason of her sudden success.

‘They will never recognise your writing, Felix, and I think these will take the starch out of her. How I should enjoy seeing her hissed some night.’

Unfortunately, however, for their little scheme, Artemus Borrymore had several specimens of Felix’s caligraphy. Being the business man of Beatrice, she placed her letter in his hands to attend to. He identified the author at once. Edward also, who had come back, likewise placed his letter in the hands of his friend, and so opened the way for her explanations. She told him her story quietly, as she had resolved to do. The same story he had long ago heard from Arnold, with the parts which that gentleman was then ashamed to tell.

Edward was furious against his former friend, and promptly cut him from his list of acquaintances. But it made no difference in his regard for Beatrice. He approved of her actions in every particular. He was too broad-minded to place any importance upon the performance or omission of a man-made ceremony.

Borrymore, acting on the permission of Beatrice, returned copies of both scurrilous epistles to the writer, Felix Jackal, and threatened him with legal proceedings for his infamy.

This caused some consternation at Villa Heloise. Felix was terribly frightened, while Hyacinthine was furious at her ruse having miscarried.

‘I shall kill that woman, Felix, or, at least, spoil her beauty. Next time I tackle her it will be with something more biting than ink.’

CHAPTER XXXIX

EXIT ARNOLD KIRKLOCK

It was long after midnight, and Arnold Kirklock was in his chambers in the Albany.

He had dismissed his valet for the night, and was alone. On the table stood the invariable decanter of brandy, syphons of mineral waters, ice, glasses, tobacco-jar and pipes. Beside them also lay a packet of letters and some trinkets, among which glittered an engagement ring. Hilda Gresham had given him his liberty, with her father's approval.

He had just finished reading her farewell letter. It was a pathetic one, for it was inspired by a broken heart. She had seen the change that had come over him, and struggled against conviction and pride for a long time. Her brother had told her the cause, for lately his behaviour had been an open scandal. Now it was all over between them. It was a ladylike letter, and free from reproaches. Between the lines Arnold might have read, if he loved her, the feeble wish that he would not take her at her word. Had he loved her, this pathetic farewell might have done him good by rousing him to make an effort to shake off his hopeless infatuation and degrading habits. The poor girl let him see only too plainly that she was wishing to give him another chance if he would take it. Her father and brothers had plainly forced her to this step, but her faithful heart still clung to this unworthy object who was once so honoured and still adored.

Arnold sat looking at this letter with a brutalised face and gloomy eyes in which no compunction was expressed. He was at liberty to go his own evil way, and he was not sorry. Hilda had taken the step which he could not him-

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self, and broken the fetters that had galled him so many months. He was free now from that infliction if no nearer to his mad desires.

Since his first rejection by Beatrice he had lost all control of himself even as a man. Instead of avoiding her now, he had sought her everywhere, and in the most open, shameless manner pursued her with his loathsome suit. He had pestered her with letters; hung about the stage door; waylaid her in her walks, and waited at her private house. He was brutal, violent, passionate, cringing; in fact, he did everything that a man dangerously enamoured can do to force the woman he desires to yield to his importunity. There had been no possible evasion of him nor doubt about his intentions. Beatrice was being hunted to the death, and all London knew about his infatuation. One thing only he had not yet done, and that was to carry out his cowardly threat of exposing her past. He had gone very low, but he had not yet plunged into this depth of desperation and infamy.

He had been warned by the police from the theatre. Twice or thrice he had tried to force his way in, and each time had been turned out. Edward Lesslie and he had met, quarrelled and fought together at the stage entrance. Edward easily beat him in his present dilapidated condition, and now attended Beatrice everywhere as her protector from this wretched lunatic. She treated his letters with silent contempt, and showed him, when he appeared before her, the aversion she felt for him. He had now no chance of getting near her, and he was desperate. The game was almost finished. He could see when he went to his clubs how unpopular he was with his former friends. When this news of his broken engagement was known he would be sure to get the hint to withdraw from the society of gentlemen. He was utterly disgraced. When men behave in this unseemly fashion, and force their unwelcome attentions upon a lady, the sex rises *en masse* against them. Men may wink at vice unless it is pretty dark hued, but they repudiate open violence and blackguardism. The age when the bold bad baron flourished is over. He was ruined socially he knew, but he no longer cared. He had reached that stage

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of desperation when the opinions of his fellows no longer troubled him. He was abandoned to the devil, and like a lost woman who flaunts her degradation in the streets, he was utterly shameless. Love, the evil love that now drew him on, with brandy, had given him the resolution which had been so long wanting in his character. A weak man, when driven desperate, always, like a rat, becomes resolute and dangerous at his last stand.

His rooms were comfortably and tastefully furnished, as was natural in a man of his position. In his dress also and grooming he bore the semblance of a gentleman. But the last few weeks had made a woful change in his face and figure. Hopeless passion, combined with drink, had done more damage to his frame and mind than the most violent fever.

For the past few weeks his life had been unmitigated hell. It was better that Hilda had not seen much of him during this period. Beaten about like the lost souls in the Inferno by that furious gust of passion, drinking fiery spirits to supply the vacuum caused by neglect of food, torn with unappeasable desire, he was on this midnight the incarnation of degradation and despair.

He had sown in idleness, and he was reaping earless oats under a gloomy, tempest-filled vault with tears and curses. He had made a plaything of passion in his youth, and now he was its broken, tortured slave. And for the same woman whom he had treated lightly and let go then, he was now bartering his soul and wrecking his body in hopeless cravings and vain desires. Verily his punishment seemed mightier than his offence. But so it must be ever with the offender, a moment's wrong requires a lifetime of atonement. It takes longer to wash a garment than to stain it, and a sin that is allowed to grow may become a cureless cancer. No one can possibly commit a crime with impunity, or do a good action without reward. His face was puffed and blotched with patches of purple, green and saffron, and presented a strange, unwholesome, ghastly dinginess. He had drunk deeply, yet not long enough to bring out the tissue of blood rings which impart to the face of the habitual drunkard that enduring colour that looks at first sight like

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ruddy health. There was a swarthy pallor on this young man's visage like the drowned, or the advanced victim of brain softening. His nose, cheeks, eyelids and lips were swollen and semi-transparent as if puffed out with water. His dark eyes were deep set and almost hidden by the blunted brows ; spasmodic twitches passed frequently along the nerves and muscles of the flaccid jaws. His neck appeared shorter, while his chest, back and shoulders seemed to be padded. His paunch also was swollen until his legs looked fleshless and spidery. The once shapely proportions of Arnold Kirklock were ruined for ever. He might recover his intellect and health, but never more his graceful figure nor prematurely lost youth.

His hair was almost white, and even his moustache was grizzled ; in appearance he looked like a man past middle age, while his hands and limbs trembled like those of an octogenarian. Yet over this wreckage hovered the colourless ghost of youth, which gave to that shaking figure, white hair and flaccid face the unreality which a snowy wig and painted wrinkles impart to a young person made up to represent age. He was older and more decayed than even many aged men look who have lived their allotted span, yet the spectator, by some indescribable, subtle instinct, would have known at the second glance that he had not yet lived thirty years. This deathly age-in-youth appearance made him the more terrible and tragic to contemplate as he tottered aimlessly about his chambers.

On the wall above the mantelpiece hung three framed photographs of Beatrice in character. He had bought these from a shop some months before, feeding his passion by gazing upon them. In his bedroom, where he could see it as he lay, was a large engraving of her as Juliet. These portraits seemed to smile upon and mock his misery, yet they were more to him than all his other possessions. While sitting at the table he had filled and emptied the tumbler six times, four times adding soda to the brandy, but the two last draughts had been undiluted brandy. The spirits had no effect on him now. Six months previously half the quantity he had already taken would have sent him to his bed speechless, but now it seemed like drinking water.

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He was walking up and down the room now, or rather shambling, with trembling legs and uncertain steps. Sometimes he would drag his limbs feebly, at other times take short, restless jumps, to stop suddenly as if lost in thought. Each time he passed the decanter he seized it, and pouring some of the contents into the glass, while he spilt some on the cloth, he would gulp it greedily down, and then continue his aimless promenade.

Once or twice he stood and looked gloomily at the photographs for some minutes, then, as if they enraged him, he burst into a volley of oaths, and shook his clenched fists at them, to turn again to the huge decanter and his ambling walk. He was trying to make himself drunk without success. Trying to blank out that engrossing thought which had murdered sleep. After a time he sank down exhausted on the easy-chair, and putting his hand to his forehead he began to weep. Large teardrops ran down the sides of his blunted nose unheeded, while in whimpering tones he addressed the absent object of his desire. His words came from him brokenly, and choked with heavy sighs. He was imploring her to pity him for his soul's sake. His words were incoherent and abject, and his tears unmanly, yet his pose was pathetic and heartbroken.

For a time he sat there in a state of collapse, then he suddenly bent forward with his head on one side in the attitude of listening, and his dark eyes fixed on the door. The large teardrops still hung to his nostrils and moustache, but his eyes were glowing with living flames.

'She is coming. I know that footstep although it is so long since I heard it coming to my room; at last she has consented to be merciful.' He sprang to his feet, and, staggering to the door, he opened it wide and made a deep bow to the space beyond.

'Come in, Beatrice, there is no one about.' My man has gone to bed hours ago. How sweet of you to come at last.'

He stood aside to permit the ghost he saw to enter, saying, as he did so,—

'Playing Juliet to-night? Ah! I did not know that was on this week. The brutes won't let me come near you

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now, darling, but it is all right since you have consented at last. Your dress is lovely, and I am so glad you have come without changing. Come in, my dearest; come in and let me shut the door.'

He pointed to the easy-chair for his spectre visitor to be seated, then he turned to close the door.

'Hallo! who are these fellows you have brought with you, Beatrice? Juvenile pages. Upon my word, it looks as if you had been playing Miranda or Titania instead of Juliet, to see the elfish attendants who follow you. What an interminable crowd! Red, blue, yellow and green. No, no, kiddies, I cannot crush you all inside; some of you must wait in the hall. Stand back, some of you, and let me shut the door.'

To his imagination some impediment prevented him from closing the door, for he left it ajar, and turned towards the empty chair.

'Where has Beatrice gone, you little wretches?' he cried, glaring round him, while he seemed to move small objects from his legs with his trembling hands. 'Into the bedroom, do you say? Well, clear out of my way, will you, and let me go to her. Good God! what a medley, and how they all keep charging about.'

He was standing in the middle of the room, looking round as Gulliver may have looked on his Lilliputian friends, an impatient, perplexed frown on his swollen brow.

'Strange, I never saw such small children before, nor any more active on their pins. It's amusing, very, but I wish they would stop playing leap-frog, and give me space enough to pass between them to where Beatrice is waiting. Curious little fellows, but they look uncommonly like devils, with their horns, tails and hoofs, frisking about. Oh! I say, that is quite enough. Take a rest, will you, and let me pass.'

He stooped until his hands nearly touched the carpet, and seemed to be brushing objects out of his way as he went slowly towards his bedroom. He passed through the open door at the other end of the room, and entered his dressing-room. He appeared to see who he was after then in front of the table.

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‘Ah! Beatrice, won’t you come and have some supper? and, if you don’t mind, order a few dozens of these fairies or demons to go home. I left them introducing rats, snakes and other stage properties into my sitting-room. They seem to want to make a morning of it.’

He leaned heavily on the table, and looked tenderly at the image which his disturbed fancy had raised, at the same time he made many furtive kicks with his feet as if trying to shake off some unpleasant clings to his legs. He was looking at the other side of the dressing-table, with the toilet-glass between.

‘Ah! my razor—you think I ought to use it, Beatrice? Well, yes, my chin is rather bristly, I must admit.’ He took one of his razors from its case and opened it, while he bent his head as if to listen to a whisper. ‘Cut my throat, eh, Beatrice? Certainly, if *you* wish me to do so, darling. I should rather like to live with you than die with you; still, as you say it is impossible after what has happened, I am willing, only do send these mischievous imps out of the way. I can do it better if I have only you to look at me. Ah! thank you, my darling. Now I am happy. Take my hand and lead me to the bedroom. I should like best to do it there.’

Arnold spoke quite cheerfully, as he stretched out one hand, while in his other he grasped his open razor.

Softly he went into the bedroom with his arms extended as if led; then gently he placed himself upon the bed, with his face turned toward the portrait on the wall.

‘Kiss me, dearest, first, and I will obey you. Then you will know that my love has been at last sincere.’

With one firm, resolute stroke he severed his windpipe, and fell back on the pillow, with his eyes fixed steadfastly on the engraving.

He had expiated his fault and been rewarded; much as the best of us are for our devotions, by a mirage which comforted him quite as well as the reality could have done at that tragic moment.

CHAPTER XL

HOW EVA IS MADE AN ANGEL

UNCLE FELIX was not a lucky man. Indeed, Nature had qualified him to be a martyr rather than a moneymaker in the financial line. As a pawnbroker or a second-hand clothes-dealer he might have made a decent living but never a fortune, even in these retiring lines.

His sense and knowledge of truth, honesty and morality of all kinds were sufficiently meagre to fit him for the post of Foreign Ambassador anywhere, if he had only possessed *tact*; but he was not artistic nor diplomatic. He had only the low cunning of the dog; he could steal and hide his bone, and this was the beginning and end of his intelligence. He was dishonest, untruthful enough to have made a first-class company promoter and financier, only that he utterly lacked confidence in himself and courage. In fact he was more fitted by his peculiar instincts and temperament to have succeeded as a local preacher of the Stiggins order or canting Sunday School teacher than in any bolder and more manly line of knavery. He was a timid, gentle, weak-souled and feeble-bodied craven, without convictions of any kind, able to play the hypocrite and endure insults meekly, supported with a kind of mild, small spite that was not strong enough to carry him to a courageous point of revenge. He could negotiate a swindle or an infamy up to the moment of action. Then, on the first appearance of danger, he would shrink back to his shell as a snail does, and lie covered when he ought to have been moving.

This was the reason why all his plans failed, and instead of reaping the reward of his scoundrelism he always was more or less a loser; also why he had hitherto escaped the

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just penalty of his misdeeds, although the law always hovered above him with itching fingers. He was what is generally called a poor villain.

For a short time after the arrival of Eva, fortune smiled upon them in an encouraging way. The African business did not advance, but several outside speculations were successful enough to make both Hyacinthine and Felix wish that they had plunged deeper into them, or not sold out quite so quickly.

During this spell of good luck, Hyacinthine was able to redeem the bulk of her jewellery and meet the quarter's interest on her mortgaged furniture, besides giving some sops to her dressmaker and tradesmen, so that she was what may be termed fairly prosperous.

The family of Jackals likewise had not been bothered by losing Court actions for a considerable time, therefore they were beginning to emerge from their bashful obscurity and bait the public with reports from their supposed mines. The two bare-looking rooms at the top of an obscure building near Mark Lane, which they called the offices of the company, once again stood with open doors. Jackal senior, a patriarchal, Rabbi-like gentleman, with a long, snowy beard, flowing ringlets and black skull-cap, could be seen at certain hours by inquirers, surrounded by reports, plans and maps. This miserable old figure-head only appeared in the City when the coast was clear; at other occasions his dutiful son called at uncertain times for letters, leaving a very disrespectful clerk in the outer office to attend to ordinary customers, *i.e.*, the customers who came to abuse or molest.

For a time, however, both Felix and his father were able to enter their own premises like honest men, and face the visitors blandly while they talked about reforming their board.

Then the clouds began to gather darkly again, and fortune turned her back on this fated family. Jackal *père* vanished to his country residence to attend to his garden, while Felix had once more to slink down side streets and find his way to his office under cover of the night. Again the jewellery went back to the pawnshop, and the private consulta-

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tions between the confederates became gloomy in the extreme.

It was a daily fight now to keep up appearances, and in this battle the action fell entirely upon Hyacinthine. Felix had nothing to pledge, and the most he was fit for was to act as negotiator between Hyacinthine and the money-lenders, and even in this he was by no means so adroit as she was herself. Yet he served her as a secretary and as a confident, which she could not do without.

It was a nerve-straining battle, for every post brought some monetary trouble, which had to be faced either by a promise or something to account. She was being driven to desperate expedients to meet these different demands, and this exercised both their brains to the utmost. Staving off requires almost as much *finesse* and nerve as statecraft. Hyacinthine dare not retrench a single expense, as this would have meant total collapse. Indeed, she was forced to show off more than ever, and hide her fox under richer cloaks.

In spite also of her self-deceptions and assertions, her nerves were getting worse, likewise her temper—that is, the intervals of good-humour were becoming shorter and less frequent, for her temper could not possibly be increased, any more than a tempest at its height can be. It was, however, pretty nearly all temper and tempest now, with hardly any lull.

She drove Eva like as a devil drives a damned soul. She raved at Felix and Delphine with hardly any intermission, and her parasites, finding things getting beyond endurance, commenced to drop off. She had more evenings to herself now to devote to business, but she was beginning to find that her head was not so equal to business as it had been when there was less to do.

Something was going wrong with her magnificent health, and she could not tell what. The least worry made her head swim, and several times she had really fainted without any apparent cause. She had terrible depressions and forebodings of evil, while she would flush all over at the least excitement, and afterwards shake with utter prostration. Rheumatic pains seized on all her joints, particularly in the

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legs and feet, so that she could hardly walk ; and often when she was out a strange dizziness seized upon her, which terrified her dreadfully.

She was growing terribly obese also, in spite of all the anti-fat concoctions she took. This annoyed her more than the other symptoms, as her figure was her deity. If she went on piling flesh at this rate, she felt she would soon look quite middle-aged. It was horrible !

She consulted her doctor, who nearly sent her insane by telling her she must expect some such change at her time of life. He gave his verdict delicately and diplomatically, as fashionable doctors do, yet he could not hide the truth altogether.

‘Heavens ! doctor, what do you mean ? I am only twenty-seven.’

‘That does not matter,’ answered the medico, blandly ; ‘these changes occur to ladies at different ages. You must have been premature in your youth, being of an extremely high-toned, fine-nerved temperament. Those other symptoms are suppressed gout. I shall give you a prescription which will make you all right.’

‘I suppose I must give up all wines and that sort of thing?’

‘Oh, dear, no. A little champagne and brandy will benefit you greatly, but take care that you only drink the very best.’

This doctor knew his patient thoroughly, and she had great confidence in his professional skill, otherwise she would have quarrelled with him. Therefore, since he thought brandy and champagne were good for her, she stuck to them religiously.

The goddess, Athena, at this time began to smell a rat amidst the perfumes of Villa Heloise, and advised her affectionate sister not to visit Hyacinthine quite so often. For herself, she discontinued her visits altogether, giving as her excuse to outsiders that she didn’t quite approve of the constant presence of that illiterate and vulgar fellow, Uncle Felix. This came back to the ears of Hyacinthine, the result being that Iduna met a warm reception next time she came, and, to Hyacinthine’s surprise, took the part of her

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sister. Iduna had, in an indiscreet moment of weakness, when the champagne glass had too frequently been filled, been shown a fleeting glimpse of the reality of affairs with her adored Juliet. She remembered her own girlish innocence as soon as she saw how things were veering, and abandoned her patroness after uttering a few artless home truths. After this she shrugged her skinny shoulders, and turned up her eyes in chaste horror whenever the name of Mrs Hart-Beachcomber was mentioned.

The others also went their various ways, and Hyacinthine was left alone to curse them as scorpions and ingrates.

Matters were becoming very desperate when she announced to Uncle Felix that she was thoroughly disillusioned and tired of her *protégée* Eva.

'She is a very bad girl, full of cunning and deceit. I have written to-day to tell her mother to come and take her away,' Hyacinthine said one evening when he came in.

'I am 'eartily glad to 'ear it, 'Yacinthine, for I begin to fear, if things don't take a turn, we shall 'ave to 'ook it hout of 'ere hourselves,' answered Felix, gloomily.

'I have told the little brat that she has to go, and kept her in bed to-day as she pretends she is ill.'

'Wot's the matter?' asked Felix. 'Nothing catching, I 'ope?'

'Delphine thinks it is a cold; she is certainly feverish, and a little lighs-headed, if the crafty little jade isn't putting it on in order to skulk,' said Hyacinthine, carelessly, omitting to correct Uncle Felix's lapses.

'Get 'er hout as quick as possible,' cried Felix, ^{was}alarmed. 'Hit may be scarlet fever; that's going about hat present.'

'Her mother will come to-morrow. If she doesn't, I'll send her home in a cab with Delphine. Now for business.'

They were still engaged on their business talk when the poor mother of Eva^a arrived. The letter which Hyacinthine had sent her had been so insulting and cruel, that all the mother was roused in her. To read that her child, who had been the sweetest and most loving, as well as truest, of children, should be thus wantonly maligned, made her brave and for the time forgetful of her destitute circumstances.

Hyacinthine tried to be haughty and superior, but^e she

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failed to awe this afflicted lady any longer. She demanded at once to be taken to her child, and refused to sit or talk to this capricious maligner. Hyacinthine arrogantly rang for Delphine, and ordered the servant to get both mother and daughter off as soon as possible. After this she retired into the dining-room, where Uncle Felix waited, and slammed the door loudly behind her. This was Hyacinthine's usual mode of displaying dignity and avoiding unpleasant situations at the same time ; not an uncommon mode with persons of her noble instincts and refined disposition.

Delphine, however, although so slavishly devoted to her unworthy mistress, had sufficient womanliness to prepare the visitor for what to expect. It was from Delphine she learnt that her little daughter had been looking ill for a fortnight past, although only that day unable to rise. When the mother heard this she flew upstairs distracted. All fears as to how she was to keep her daughter, also all resentment against her vile tyrant, were, for the time, forgotten.

When she entered the room she found Eva wide awake, and repeating her lessons in hoarse, gasping tones, but utterly unconscious of her mother. She placed the child's head on her bosom, and tried to soothe her, but Eva never heard the loving words. She continued her recitations, one after the other, without pausing a moment between. Her pretty brown eyes were dry, bright and bloodshot, and her face flushed, hot, and also parched.

'Merciful God ! how has my child been treated in this horrible house ?' cried the poor mother, distracted.

'Madam has always given her the best of everything in food and dress,' replied Delphine. 'But I think, in her anxiety to make Eva accomplished, she has rather overtaxed her with lessons. She is such a good, willing child, as you must know.'

'She has murdered my darling. Had this woman not the heart to see what she was doing ? Quick, get me a cab. I must take my poor child out of this at once, or I shall kill the inhuman monster.'

Delphine glided from the bedroom to consult her mistress.

'Her mother wishes to remove Eva at once, madam.'

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‘Well, let her do so,’ cried Hyacinthine, angrily. ‘I have no wish to keep the ungrateful little baggage. Put something on her, the oldest dress she has, and pack them off, only don’t disturb me till they are out. I am busy.’

‘But, madam, little Eva does not recognise her mother, and I fear she is very ill. Would it not be as well if madam were to go upstairs and speak to the mother?’

‘No,’ answered Hyacinthine, harshly. ‘I have had quite enough of this little nuisance with her sly tricks. This illness is all gammon to induce me to open my purse, but I have spent far too much already on both impostors. Give them one of the blankets off the bed if she does not feel inclined to get up and dress. Call a cab first, however, and let her take her ungrateful, lying brat to the hospital or the workhouse if she likes. She must not be ill in my house. There, be off, and don’t show your face here again till you shut the door on them.’

‘Has madam any message to give her?’ asked Delphine, humbly, yet unwilling to do this ungracious task.

‘Oh, bother! Tell her I shall expect to hear how Eva gets on after all my goodness. Also that I will forward some of the old dresses, which may be useful to Eva; and—yes, there is a couple of shillings to pay the cab fare. Now I think I have done my duty to the extreme limit of good-nature.’

• Eva was wrapped in a blanket and carried by her mother down to the cab. When Delphine gave the man the address and asked the charge, he answered, ‘Four shillings.’ Rather than face her mistress again, Delphine paid the extra two shillings out of her own savings. She liked Eva, and felt sorry to see her packed out like this in such a condition. As the cab drove away, Delphine watched it with tearful eyes, afterwards she went into the kitchen and had a good cry. She felt all the more desolate to have seen the last of that bright little maid.

And it was the last, for three days later poor Eva died of exhaustion and brain-fever—another of the fair Hyacinthine’s numerous victims.

She never recognised her mother, who, through those three terrible days and nights, stood by her darling’s bed-

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side and listened to recitation after recitation, some in English, some in French, rattled off with all the grotesque intonations and aped actions she had learned from this terrible fool. Sometimes the little figure would shrink from her mother and cry piteously, 'I do try to learn. Oh, auntie, I do try to learn, only don't strike me so hard.' Then she would begin again faster than ever with her brain-torturing tasks.

Delphine came the next day with a little bundle of clothes. She had put in more than Hyacinthine ordered her to do, and likewise delivered a kind message, which Hyacinthine did not send. The mother listened with stony eyes.

'Tell your mistress that the doctor says my child will die. Tell her that she is as cruel a murderess as if she had starved or stabbed my child, and don't forget to add that while I live I shall never say my prayer, without asking God to punish her for this hellish crime. Now go, and take that bundle with you.'

Delphine went, but she left the bundle, which afterwards the landlady's children had. Two days after this Eva died, trying to get through in French 'The House that Jack Built.' When she came to the line, 'This is the rat—' she suddenly stopped. Her lessons were over, and all that remained for her mother was to close the sightless, dark eyes, bury this little martyred body, and think how she was to pay the doctor and the undertaker. Hyacinthine had succeeded in making an angel after all.

CHAPTER XLI

NEMESIS

At this time a change had taken place in the mental decline of Mrs Lesslie. It was the beginning of the end, the doctor informed her husband. He heard the opinion with mixed feelings of grief and hopelessness. Like Beatrice, he never had entertained any desire for the death of the poor woman, although sometimes he felt that he ought to have done so for her sake as much as for his own.

It is not well for man nor woman to live alone, and men and women are always alone, no matter how many friends they possess, unless they have a wife or a husband. All other conditions are sacrifices and against Nature, and Nature never fails to revenge outrages.

The world had gained by his sacrifice, doubtless, as the world ever wins something out of her martyrs. Possibly he did better and more work—more work certainly. The outcasts in the parks had reason to be thankful that he was parted from his wife. But individually he had lost more than the world had gained. Only one compensation could atone for this loss, and that was immortality. If this life was all that he had to live, then his loss was irreparable. No man can waste an hour, far less a pleasure, without regret as from a treasure extremely limited. Of course a man who has exhaustless treasures may squander his money recklessly, so also may one who possesses exhaustless life.

This disappointment made Edward Lesslie consider immortality more than he might have done had he been satisfied with earth. And that contemplation produced a certain comfort. No material perished absolutely. It was only changed and re-used by Nature. If, therefore, no

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atom of matter was wasted, could the lives and emotions of humanity, *i.e.*, their souls, be called into existence as anomalies to these universal laws of Nature? It seemed as impossible as it was unreasonable. If a thunder-clap can set universes in action, then not even a sentiment is wasted.

His love for his wife was not dead, but it had changed as she had done. It was no longer the love a man has towards a woman in whom he reposes his strength and confidence, but rather that which he entertains towards his child.

At first she had hated and feared him, so that at the doctor's advice he had sacrificed his inclination to see her, his visits disturbed and pained her so greatly. This had been a hard time, but not so trying as the present. She had become like a child, and regarded him now as her father, with whom in her infantine and foolish way she was fond of. To please her he now went often to see her.

These were terrible visits to him, and he always returned from them a prey to melancholy, which took days to remove. Beatrice knew each time he went, and did her best to comfort him when he came back.

It would have been utterly base and coarse in any man who was enamoured of a woman to speak to her so confidentially about his wife as Edward talked to Beatrice about his emotions. To a sister, however, it was not so; nor would it have been to a tried and bosom friend; the obligations of love forbid many confidences which friendship may receive with honour. That he found a satisfaction untarnished by shame in making her the recipient of his matrimonial miseries pointed clearly to one of two conclusions. His sentiments towards Beatrice were either purely fraternal or else she had become the keeper of his soul. When a man and a woman are perfectly mated their souls and minds become fused long before their bodies are joined. Confidences then are imperative in large as in small matters, and what might be mean to tell a half wife or an untried friend becomes as natural and involuntary as the thoughts which come unasked and unquestioned.

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Beatrice had become this perfect confidant to him* as he was to her, and neither honour nor conscience pricked them for their faith and trust. These are the only gauges by which right and wrong can be tested with humanity, and when they approve all other conventional standards are valueless. As for outside opinions, only hypocrites and cowards study them as guides. Laws and customs are made to control criminals and mindless masses, not discriminating individuals.

A few weeks after the suicide of Arnold Kirklock, Edward Lesslie paid his customary visit to his wife. She was domiciled in a semi-private asylum, that is, a house under Government supervision, where private patients are admitted. Edward had a proper horror for these self-conducted sanatoriums, where the owner has unlimited authority, and from which such tales of horror and cruelty sometimes oze out.

This asylum was situated in one of the most healthy and picturesque counties in England, and about four hours' journey from London. On this occasion Beatrice and the two children accompanied him to the village, which stood half a mile from the house.

He left his companions at the best hotel in the place while he went on alone to see Grace. In his hand he carried a small bag filled with such presents as a child of four or five years of age would appreciate. His poor wife always looked forward to these visits and the contents of this bag with eager delight.

After passing the gatekeeper he walked through the large grounds, which were beautifully diversified by lawns, trees and gardens. It was the sweetest retirement that could have been selected as far as landscape and adornment was concerned. There were shady walks, with privet and boxwood hedges lining them, and venerable trees arching overhead. Fountains and tiny cascades, with open stretches of green turf, leading into gaily-coloured flower-gardens. Nothing outside nor inside either had been neglected to give as much pleasure to the afflicted inhabitants as mortal could devise.

He encountered many of the inmates with their keepers.

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moving about and amusing themselves according to their fancy, and at last was met by his wife. She expected him, and fluttered forward to meet him. How fragile she had grown during those few short years! He had once seen Gladstone, a little time before his death, totter down the floor of the House of Commons in the same light and floating manner. His eyes filled with tears as he watched her approach, yet he managed to wipe these drops away and force a cheery smile before she drew near enough to see them. Her face was thin and almost transparent in its colourless clearness. Her hair had grown like snow, and her form was shrunk to half its former size. But she was beautiful still; her eyes had the limpid purity of a child's, and on her white lips hovered a joyous smile. Edward had been mercifully spared from having to look on the brutishness and ugliness which imbecility often takes on. She was perfectly harmless, and gave very little trouble to her nurses.

'Oh! papa, I am so glad to see you, and what have you brought me this time?'

Edward stooped down and kissed her; then giving her his hand they sat down on one of the seats together, while he opened the bag and showed her the contents. She was delighted, and expressed her pleasure in little cries of pleasure, kissing him to show how grateful she was, and nestling against him as children do. Her voice was very feeble, and she found great difficulty in bringing out the words; she pronounced them in disjointed syllables, with pauses between, as if she was uncertain of the next, but her hearer guessed what she failed in saying or thought she had said. She had completely forgotten her marriage and her children, and was convinced that she was still a child.

Thus they sat while she examined her toys and the pretty doll he had brought her. Then, exhausted with her excitement, she put a chocolate into her mouth, and leaning her head against his breast she fell contentedly asleep.

As he watched that worn face, and quietly stroked her white hair while he listened to her soft breathing, the pain at his heart grew almost intolerable. It was not love that now moved him, but a tenderness, regret and pity that

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suffocated him. He thought of the time when her lightest touch had thrilled him, when that small thin hand which he now held so softly for fear of hurting it was his most precious possession, and the light within those eyes, now veiled, changed the world into paradise. All these charms were gone. It was something different which now lay so lightly upon his breast and so heavily upon his heart. There was a weight and tightness in his chest that not even the heavy sighs that broke from him could relieve. His sufferings were beyond description.

At last she woke and let him go with the same gentle but unemotional caresses with which she had received him. She was now eager to share his sweets with her companions, and let them see her new doll and toys, and with a pathetic smile she gathered them up and left him. He watched her still graceful figure disappear with a smile, then he laid his head on his arm and broke utterly down. When he joined Beatrice and the children he was haggard and ash-coloured, with the wearied expression in his eyes which men have when they are hopeless. She knew how he felt, and said nothing to him at the time. He would speak to her when they were alone, after he had recovered somewhat, and she could then show him her sympathy.

They had dinner together in her room with the children after reaching the flat. When that was over she drove off to the theatre alone, leaving him with his pipe and a book. Afterwards, when the play was over, he met her at the stage-door, and they walked home together. She made way for him to enter when they reached her flat, and then she sat down to act her part of comforter and loyal friend.

They had not been sitting long when the outer door bell sounded.

'I wonder who that can be at this late hour,' cried Beatrice, annoyed at the interruption.

'Let me answer,' said Edward, getting up and leaving the room. He appeared a moment afterwards, followed by Mrs Hart-Beachcomber.

There was a wicked and dangerous expression on the white face of this late visitor that made Edward keep his eyes very closely upon her movements. She was dressed in

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a black silk beaded costume, with a velvet cape over her shoulders, and a sable feathered hat. One gloved hand was held persistently under her cape in a manner suggestive of those bravos who in olden times held their stilettoes ready to strike. Edward was not given to romantic fancies, but knowing her hatred for his friend, and seeing her present pose and get-up, after those anonymous letters, he instantly suspected treachery of some kind ; therefore he held himself ready to frustrate it, and kept as close to her as he could get.

Beatrice rose, astonished at this ill-timed visit, and indignant at the audacity of this woman daring to face her again. As Hyacinthine advanced with a savage glare in her eyes, Beatrice retreated slowly, while Edward got adroitly between them with his glance on that uplifted elbow.

‘To what am I indebted for this intrusion, Mrs Hart-Beachcomber?’ asked Beatrice, coldly.

‘I am leaving London to-morrow morning, and I had something to say to you before I departed,’ answered Hyacinthine, still advancing as she spoke. ‘I called here twice to-day, but you were out. Can I see you alone?’

Beatrice, still keeping the same distance between her and Hyacinthine, glanced at Edward, who shook his head without removing his eyes from that hidden arm. She took the hint and replied,—

‘No, madam. What you may have to say, speak before my friend, from whom I have no secrets.’

‘Very well, then, you vile traitress. Take that—’

As the hand suddenly appeared from the cape Edward struck up the elbow smartly, while Beatrice started aside.

A shrill scream of agony burst from the lips of Hyacinthine, as she dropped an unstoppered phial from her hand, the contents of which had been splashed into her face. Then she fell writhing and shrieking on the carpet. Edward swooped upon the bottle, and read ‘Sulphuric acid—poison’ on the label. He at once bent over the shrieking woman.

‘Get me some salad oil, Beatrice, quick, and run for the nearest doctor. The wretch has received herself what she intended for you.’

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Beatrice ran to obey his orders, and while he was still trying to cool the fearful burn by pouring oil over the scarred face and holding the treacherous and tortured Hyacinthine down, the doctor entered.

The injured woman was placed in the bed of Beatrice, and for several days suffered horribly. She would have been much worse if Edward had not attended her so promptly. As it was, however, when she was able to be taken away she presented a hideous aspect. The sight of one eye was completely destroyed, while her face showed scars which would never be erased. She went away with despair and baffled hatred rioting in her narrow heart. She had received the direst punishment that could be inflicted on such a woman—the total disfigurement of her adored countenance.

CHAPTER XLII

JUSTICE PURSUES

IT was unfortunate for Mrs Hart-Beachcomber that she had decided to treat herself to vengeance when her own concerns demanded her full attention. The week she had been confined to the bedroom of her successful rival finished her up financially.

Matters had reached a climax at Villa Heloise a day or two before Hyacinthine tried to settle that unowing debt to Beatrice. Only a few pounds remained at her bankers, which she had hitherto kept there in order to have the use of a cheque-book. Her dressmaker had refused to serve her any more, which meant that the next step would be a summons; it is a fatal sign when fashionable tailors and dressmakers want their accounts settled right off. Her butcher, baker and grocer, etc., were both importunate and insultingly disobliging. The extreme date in which the interest on her furniture should be paid was within two days of expiring, and some of her jewellery had become due. Ruin stared her most impertinently in the face.

As for Uncle Felix, he had become a defaulter on the Stock Exchange, and dared no longer exhibit his Jewish nose in the City. The tailor, wine and tobacco merchants, who had done their utmost to make him a gentleman, were now hunting high and low after him, with powers to seize his mangy person wherever they could find it. Being of too shy a disposition he had ignored the summonses against him, and had now become, like the bold Robin Hood, an outlaw. For the past week or two he had been living in an obscure lodging near St Pancras Station,

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where Hyacinthine was forced to visit him to continue their consultations.

The game was up, and only one course was left this precious pair, and that was to realise as much as possible out of the wreckage and fly. Mrs Felix Jackal's lawyer was also amongst the pack of hunters for aliment money unpaid.

Hyacinthine had gone into the City and beat up several Israelites of Felix's acquaintance. From them she had raised some money by selling outright her pawn-tickets. She had now sufficient to take them to one of the provincial cities, and they decided to give Liverpool a trial. They would be able to lie low in this seaport town until they could consider what was next to be done.

Hyacinthine, who, when her husband was alive, had scorned a hotel, was now meditating on taking a boarding-house with the meagre remnant of her fortune. Delphine would be of use in an enterprise of this kind. She would also be able to keep Felix beside her. She still believed in his African property, and had no intention of losing sight of him as long as that hope remained.

In view of this future boarding-house she made all her arrangements. With a woman's reckless disregard of legal risks, she had nearly dismantled her house, packing all the mortgaged articles she could manage in cases. These she had sent by night-time to the lodgings of Felix.

They had thus been all ready for the hegira when the Devil suddenly inspired Hyacinthine with the desire to spoil the beauty of Beatrice before she fled. Felix was waiting, with his room packed to the ceiling, and ready to receive her and Delphine the next day to travel with them in advance of the luggage. She had given him orders to do nothing before she arrived, for she was now leading the show. She had not communicated her intention to Delphine, but merely ordered that faithful slave to wait for her in the street while she was inside.

Delphine heard the screams and saw Beatrice run for the doctor. When they returned she followed them, and gave her assistance to put her mistress to bed.

It was decided by both Beatrice and Edward to say nothing about this dastardly attack for the sake of the

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wretched woman who had been so justly punished. She also, if not grateful for their silence, had the discretion to hold her tongue to the doctor after he allayed her pain.

As soon as Hyacinthine was able to think she sent Delphine to Villa Heloise and to Felix's lodgings to find out how matters stood. Three days had passed before this could be done, and the mischief of that fatal delay was accomplished.

Villa Heloise was in the hands of the brokers. Her own immunity from arrest for theft had only been secured through her cases having been traced by the holder of the mortgage and recovered. He was now in possession of her entire wardrobe and travelling-bags. Uncle Felix had also been tracked to his lair through those cases and arrested, as the money-lending fraternity reveal their clients' secrets when they are not paid to keep silent. The mortgagee knew Felix, and likewise his and her creditors, and but of revenge had given them the hint.

Hyacinthine was thus left stranded, with the exception of the money which she had secured upon her person. Her dressmaker had issued a restraint upon her personal luggage, while the tradesmen were thirsting for her blood.

It was now that the arrogance of Hyacinthine deserted her when she found herself disfigured for life and without her trappings, a pensioner upon the charity of the woman whom she still abhorred and had sought to destroy. As she lay thinking upon her misfortunes and dreading the future with a terrible shrinking fear, she resolved to sink pride and appeal to the generosity of her enemy. She had already received proofs of the innate goodness of Beatrice, and resolved to play upon it as far as possible.

Therefore, while the bandages were still on her face, she asked Beatrice for another interview, and expressing some contrition for her offence, she told the young actress her circumstances, hiding from her, however, the fact that she had any money left.

Her appeal was not made in vain. Beatrice, much as she disliked Hyacinthine, could not endure the thought of her going away destitute; she also knew, after her past extravagance, that a good round sum would be required.

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She therefore gave her a cheque for five hundred pounds without telling anyone else about it, and purchased her a fresh stock of clothing and toilet necessities. Thus, when Hyacinthine and Delphine drove from that little flat, she carried with her fresh causes for hating her triumphant rival.

'Ah! some day I'll be even with that loathsome woman, Delphine,' she said viciously to her maid as they drove along in search of a hotel.

She still adhered to her idea of taking a boarding-house in Liverpool, where she would not be known, and where she could utilise her willing and obedient domestic. She could not do anything without Delphine now, for she was so utterly ashamed of her horrible disfigurement that she would not show herself unveiled, and so left the maid to look after everything.

They slept that night in a hotel, and the next day took train for the seaport capital of Lancashire. Had Hyacinthine felt any contrition under her present chastisement, perhaps Nemesis might have laid down her whip after that first stroke, much as the culprit deserved further punishment. But, like Richard the Third in his depravity, she was consistent in her hatred, folly and malice, so that her troubles were not yet over. Her self-adored figure still remained, and the next stroke of justice was against that idol.

There was an accident on the line the day Hyacinthine travelled. The express collided with a luggage train, the result of which was a general smash up.

Fortunately there were few passengers on that journey, but Hyacinthine was amongst those who were taken from the *débris* seriously injured. Delphine escaped with a few bruises and a shake, which did not much damage her thin, wiry frame.

Hyacinthine was taken to the hospital and had one of her magnificent limbs amputated. Thus, legless and eyeless, she emerged into the world after four months' seclusion.

Meantime, under her instructions, Delphine had taken a small house and furnished it plainly. The spare bedrooms she let, and managed with economy to live without entrenching too much on her unfortunate mistress's capital.

So for the present we leave mistress and maid, the

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mistress still planning and storming, and Delphine slaving to please her. When Felix got his liberty, that is, when he had propitiated the outraged Crown for his several contempts of court, he managed to make his escape from his creditors and joined his maimed goddess in her shady retreat. Here they put their depraved heads together, and managed to take a larger, better furnished, and more profitable night-house in one of the questionable quarters of this shipping city. Here Hyacinthine once again began to dress gorgeously, while Felix lived the easy life of a gentleman landlord. They kept a good cellar, which their visitors paid for handsomely, and considerable company of both sexes. There were a few inconveniencies and troubles at times to face in this extravagant life, such as police raids and heavy fines. But on the whole Hyacinthine still reigned as a kind of queen, while her furious temper made her respected by the ladies of her court. At last she and Felix had discovered their proper vocation. When people do that they generally prosper in this life.

CHAPTER XLIII

FOUR TABLEAUX—PATHS OF THE DEAD

I

The Studio

Two figures made up this tableau in the palatial new studio in Holland Lane into which the successful painter, Edward Lesslie, had lately removed. These were the artist himself and his friend, Beatrice Gray.

He was sitting with his head resting on his arms, which were placed upon his painting-table. His attitude was grief. She was standing by his side, with her hand upon his shoulder, and the divine light of compassion upon her lovely face.

She had called upon him that morning to see his new premises and to congratulate him on his admission to the sacred outer ranks of the Academicians. He had not mentioned the honour, but she had seen it announced in the papers. She found him overwhelmed, for he had just received from the asylum doctor the news of the sudden death of his once-loved wife.

'My only friend, let me comfort you,' said Beatrice, laying her soft hand on his hair and stroking it gently, while she looked at him with the pitying eyes of an Angel of Mercy.

He did not look up, but he took her other hand, which was resting on the table, and kissed it gratefully, then placing his face upon that borrowed hand he wet it with his tears. Beatrice stood quite still and waited.

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II

The House in Liverpool

It is the drawing-room of Hyacinthine's premises, and just about midnight. A number of flashy-costumed and floridly-painted young ladies are present with their gentleman friends in evening dress. They are all more or less intoxicated, and their language is ribald, while their laughter sounds loud. Felix is sitting sedately in a corner, while Delphine dispenses the called-for refreshments, receiving gold for every order. Felix looks very thin, white-faced and ill, while he coughs almost incessantly. He is in the last stages of consumption.

Some of them are talking about the celebrated actress, Miss Helen Clevedon, who has been performing that night in the town, as she and her manager are on tour at present. The gentlemen have nearly all been to see her performance, and they are lavish in their drunken and loud-voiced praises.

'Who dares to speak about that infamous creature in my house?' roars a hoarse voice, as a bloated and obese figure stamps into the room with a wooden leg.

'Now, Mother Beachcomber.'

'Hart-Beachcomber, if you please, dog. By heaven, I'll murder the blackguard who does not address me properly!'

She seizes an empty champagne bottle, and, raising it, glares savagely with her solitary eye at the gentleman who last spoke. A general hush falls on the company, while the challenged one ducks his head.

'I beg your pardon, Mrs Hart-Beachcomber, but really, you know, Miss Clevedon is a first-class actress.'

'It is a lie, a foul lie! She is a fraud in every sense of the word, and can no more act than a pig can. If she got her deserts she should be picking oakum in the penitentiary. I was an actress, if you please, and a lady. My father was a nobleman and my first husband a gentleman of ancient lineage, not like that miserable coward sitting there coughing his useless lungs up.'

'Oh, 'Yacinthine!' remonstrated the unhappy Felix.

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'Beast, will you never take my part!' the virago shrieked, as she threw the bottle in his direction with all her force. It struck him full on the forehead, and he fell back deluged with blood.

Hyacinthine stood glaring on the low company with maniacal fury in her remaining eye. She was still most extravagantly dressed, and her tresses were still golden, but she had expanded thrice her former bulk, and her face was horrible to look upon. She had taken smallpox since her train accident, and this disease had left her features all distorted and swollen, which, with the more ancient scars of the vitriol and her evil passions, almost inhumanised her. She was like one of Hogarth's beldames.

One of the gentlemen present ran to the wounded man, while the others tried to clear out. He was a medical student, and, after examining Felix, he rose up gravely.

'He is dead, boys. Let us clear out while we can,' cried the student, as he made a rush for the window.

Too late. The police were in and surrounding the house. In a short time the room was cleared of all but the dead body. Hyacinthine and her satellites were being dragged to prison.

III

In the Condemned Cell

Inside a narrow cell crouches the bloated and gorgon-like hag who was once the gay Hyacinthine Hart-Beachcomber. Beside her sat two hard-faced female warders.

Her surroundings are different, as she is different, from the last days of her former incarnation while waiting the axe in Fortheringay Castle, although the present termination will be very similar. She has evidently forgotten that she has the traditions of the Royal Stuarts to support, for she is in a terrible state of collapse. More abject even than James the Second of England showed himself when he heard about the landing of William of Orange.

Her golden tresses have become tarnished green, with a

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blended growth of grey at the roots. Her figure in the prison garb looks like a bulging sack, and her face is loathsome in its ghastly hideousness.

'Has the reprieve not come yet?' she cried, for the thousandth time. 'I am too young to die. Surely, when the Home Secretary knows who I am, he must let me off. A lady of the loftiest birth and breeding.'

'The reprieve has been refused. The Home Secretary declines to interfere,' answers her warders pitilessly. 'Pluck up a little spunk, woman, for the priest will be here presently.'

Hyacinthine rolled on her pallet and howled like a lost soul.

IV

The rain is pouring heavily, and the streets are almost deserted. Liverpool is asleep, for it is long past midnight. A thin figure crouches behind some cases at the end of one of the quays that jut out into the Mersey. She is drenched through, for she has been there for several hours, saying her prayers.

It is the homeless Delphine. Her mistress was executed that morning for the murder of her paramour, Felix Jackal, and the slave who is left has nothing to live for. She is waiting till the traffic has quite ceased, and to finish her prayers.

At last she is ready. The course is quite clear, and the muddy river waits for her.

Softly she creeps under shadow of the cases until she is at the edge of the wharf, then, with one piteous glance into the murkiness for pardon, she lets herself drop, with hardly a splash, into the black tide. She has taken her sorrows by one of the most ordinary paths of the dead.

THE END

